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ILLYA KURYAKIN
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THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. MAGAZINE

NAPOLEON SOLO · ILLYA KURYAKIN

APRIL, 1967 VOL. 3, NO. 3

NEW FULL LENGTH U.N.C.L.E. NOVEL

THE DOLLS OF DEATH AFFAIR

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

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Beautiful and sleek they were—yet deadly beyond belief! While U.N.C.L.E. beamed a warning across the world, Solo and Illya followed a madman's trail to their most danger-packed assignment: "Find and destroy the dolls of death—before you too perish!"

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THE DOLLS of DEATH AFFAIR

THE NEW COMPLETE "U.N.C.L.E." NOVEL

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

They were twenty-four in number. Beautiful, horrible things that could bring the world to its knees in awful tribute to THRUSH. Solo and Illya knew they must destroy the dolls of death—or die!

PROLOGUE

SEVEN INTO THE SKY

FROM BELOW where he clung precariously to the ice-rimmed rope, Illya Kuryakin shouted, "My feet are growing numb inside these infernal boots. How much further, Napoleon? Can you see?"

Topmost man on the ropes they were using to scale the frozen cliff face, Napoleon Solo leaned backward just a bit. He had to balance himself carefully.

In his fur-lined climbing gear, Solo resembled an overweight bear. Very little of his face could be seen. That portion which was visible had turned purple from the cold.

The wind tugged and howled

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STARRING

NAPOLEON SOLO and ILLYA KURYAKIN

around them. An unexpected snow squall had come up just moments ago. It blasted frosty crystals of white stuff against Solo's eyes, making vision doubly hard. He clutched the rope and craned backwards another fraction of an inch, trying to peer up the rocky perpendicular of the mountain to their goal.

That goal had been clearly visible from the little ledge two hundred feet below where they had launched this last climb upward. The sudden squall was all around now. Napoleon Solo could no longer make out the small observation platform, iron-railed around its edge. The snow whirled, danced, pelted his cheeks and nose, blinding him.

Solo held to the rope with one hand, cupped his mitten around his mouth and yelled to Illya, six feet below, "We can't be far. Ten or twelve feet. But I can't see it clearly any more."

"This storm will complicate matters," Illya cried back. Hanging on the ropes and banging bodily against the mountain wall, Kuryakin too resembled a furry ball rather than a human being. "The helicopters from Basel and Bern will have difficulty landing on the upper platform. Their timing is critical, too. Should you attempt to signal them that we'll wait?"

"I can't signal because I haven't got three hands," Solo bawled back. "We can't turn back. The 'copters come in and we have to be there. Let's just keep climbing."

So saying, Solo lifted his massive snow-flecked boot to the next highest piton driven into the rock.

He hoisted his weight up gingerly. Suddenly the right sole of his boot slipped off the iron pin. He gave a yell, tensed the muscles of his arms for the jolt. It came, hurtingly, jerking him up short.

The icy rope burned so fiercely against his mittens that he could feel the heat. He kicked against the rock wall, trying to find purchase for his boots. His heart knocked hard inside his chest as the rope began to slip through his hands.

If he fell and crashed down on top of Illya—

There was nothing but about eight thousand feet of mountain air between these snow-whipped heights and the distant little Swiss Alpine valley glimmering paradoxically in the sunshine down there.

Illya had given a cry of alarm when Solo slipped. Now he remained silent, recognizing that Solo must regain his footing himself, that the slightest distraction might prove fatal.

Solo dangled in space, his feet hanging free. He tried to keep himself from sliding further down the rope. His arm sockets burned with the pain of supporting his weight as he gently, very gently,

bent his right leg at the knee and tried to move his right boot, which seemed to weigh a ton, to a piton just a few inches to his right.

The toe of his boot brushed against the iron pin. Solo transferred some of his weight to his right leg—and slipped again.

Ice on the boot-tip had betrayed him. He flopped into space, dropped another three feet with elevator swiftness. He clamped both hands around the rope and kicked his lower body savagely to the left. His frozen cheeks crinkled as his lips peeled back over his teeth. He got his left boot squarely onto another piton and, with one quick jerk, managed to straighten himself up.

Panting, he closed his eyes and rested.

"Are you all right, Napoleon?" Illya called.

"Yes. But what idiot said you climbed a mountain for the sport of it?"

"Can you resume the climb?" Illya sounded anxious. "We are three minutes behind schedule."

Bundled in his mountaineer's coat, Solo gave a jerky nod, reached over his head and grasped the next piton. The air darkened around him as he climbed. The fury of the snow increased until the last colorful patchwork glimpse of the valley below was lost.

Solo climbed in a white nightmare of aching muscles and tension. Illya's grunts of effort sounded softly below, overlaid with sudden whining bursts of wind. Gradually the shock of what had almost happened was wiped away in Solo's mind by the urgency of the mission and the nearness of their goal. Glancing upward, he saw an iron railing shining gray-dull for a moment through a rift in the blowing snow.

That, anyway, was a break. The platform was empty.

Normally the inmates of this THRUSH station would have an aircraft spotter posted on that rock platform. The abrupt squall had apparently driven the guard back inside. Solo and Illya wouldn't have an immediate fight on their hands. Solo kept climbing.

When his strength began to flag the last few feet, Napoleon Solo, United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, reminded himself of the stakes here. For nearly a year the European wing of the supra-nation that was THRUSH had befuddled U.N.C.L.E.

The complete novels depicting the amazing adventures of Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin and the rest of the famous cast of characters making up the great organization known as United Network Command for Law and Enforcement—are especially written, entirely brand-new and inspired by the tremendously exciting MGM-ARENA popular television series—"The Man From U.N.C.L.E."

by switching their communications and identification codes with incredible speed.

The swiftness with which THRUSH could alter its codes proved not only baffling but frustrating. Sometimes the elaborate ciphers were altered in a matter of hours. U.N.C.L.E. cryptographers would barely get the current code cracked, using a scrap of written message or a snip of intercepted radio transmission, before a new code was in the hands of THRUSH operatives all over the continent. And on more than one occasion, U.N.C.L.E.'s decoding had actually been rendered obsolete before it was completed.

U.N.C.L.E. strategic planners, including Mr. Waverly and his global counterparts, knew that this code-switching was probably the result of a highly centralized and automated cryptography unit. Doubtless this THRUSH unit was using both computers and the most modern instantaneous data transmission equipment available to spread the new code throughout Europe in a matter of a half hour or less.

U.N.C.L.E. believed this new centralized cryptography operation was only in the pilot stage, since similar difficulties were not as yet being encountered in other parts of the world. A maximum effort was mounted to locate the unit's headquarters.

After several months of field work, including the crossing of the palms of the proper number of informers, Solo and Illya had turned up the location, a secret stronghold constructed inside the very stone of one of the high peaks in the Swiss Alps.

THRUSH had built its befouled eagle's nest exclusively with the use of airlifted supplies and machinery, and had gone into business less than eleven months ago. So their informer said, anyway. Because Solo and Illya had won the prize, found the location, Waverly assigned them the rather hazardous honor of leading the attack team.

Napoleon Solo could have thought of other, somewhat more glamorous spots to be in just now. He caught hold of the lower rung of the iron railing running round the observation platform. With a grunt and a heave he lifted himself over the rail. Then he reached down to give Illya a hand up. The nerve-wracking climb, which had taken the better part of two hours, was over.

From this bitterly cold perch Solo and Illya could glimpse the nearby peaks when the snow parted. One of the peaks, white-topped, blazed with reflected sunlight. The snowstorm was highly localized. Still, it presented grave problems, which Illya commented on again:

"The helicopters simply won't be able to land on the platform in this storm, Napoleon."

Solo nodded. Illya referred to a

flat, open area carved from this mountain near its summit. The upper platform was presumably used for a helicopter pad, though U.N.C.L.E. spy-spotter planes had thus far photographed no craft coming or going.

Solo pushed back the ice-stiffened sleeve of his coat to consult his watch.

"We're already a minute past the rendezvous time. I don't know whether we should try to get inside or wait until the 'copters show."

The plan had originally called for Solo and Illya to create a diversion on the lower levels of the THRUSH station while U.N.C.L.E. agents landing in the 'copters caught the station's personnel off guard, from above.

"You might try communicating with the lead chopper." Illya stamped and slapped his arms against his sides.

The small platform carved from the mountain's face measured about four feet on a side. At the rear, leading inside, a steel door flecked with snow looked implacably solid. Solo agreed with Illya's idea. He fumbled for his pocket communicator, twisted the calibrations into position. A meaningless static greeted him.

"Blasted storm," Solo said, thinking of how nice the sun would be on the Riviera. "Well, if we stand out here we'll freeze. And the 'copters may be delayed indefinitely."

"Then I suppose it is rather up to us by ourselves," said Illya.

Kuryakin's eyes looked out from the frosted mask of his face. He and Solo exchanged a quick glance which indicated that they both knew, and accepted, the extreme risks of their new plan of action.

Solo gave a tight nod. He dug under his coat. In a moment he was tamping a small, gray wad of plastic material against the center of the steel entrance door.

"Back!"

Solo gave Illya a shove. Both men spun around and covered their heads with their arms. The abyss yawned below through a rift in the snow. There was a single, thudding explosion.

Scarlet sparks shot all around them. The agents spun around again and dove for the blasted-open door, dragging their long-muzzled pistols from beneath their mountaineer's coats.

They had taken no more than half a dozen running steps down a dim, concrete-walled corridor when an amplified alarm klaxon went off. Solo swept his parka hood back. The klaxon-noise blasted his ears, *raaOOGAH, raaOOGAH, raaOOGAH.*

Like snow-covered wolves the men moved, cutting to the left and up an iron-railed stair. Illya peeled off his gloves. Solo did likewise, reaching the landing and starting up the next flight. In a cross-corridor at the top two men in long

laboratory coats peered down at them.

One of the THRUSH technologists let out a yelp. Both disappeared. Solo and Illya reached the top of the stairs, skidded to a halt in the middle of a brightly-illuminated hall. Its walls were the solid rock of the mountain.

The scientists were disappearing through a double swinging doorway. From the opposite direction, three THRUSH soldiers with machine pistols charged.

"Here's the chamber of commerce with the keys to the city," remarked Solo, crouching to fire his pistol.

One of the Thrushmen seized his belly and bounced against a wall like a billiard ball against a cushion. Blood welled up over the collar of his uniform blouse. Solo backed against the wall behind him, firing fast as Illya leaped for the wall opposite and flattened himself there. They presented narrow targets.

Illya Kuryakin shot the second Thrushman in the thigh. The third Thrushman fell over the other two and Solo's bullet caught him in the left hand. The man's fingers disappeared in a shower of blood. Shrieking, he pitched on to his face.

Out of the double swing doors on the left bolted a portly, pink-pated man wearing a lab coat and pince-nez. He held the door for someone behind him, crying orders in shrill French. In a moment two other technologists leaped out of the doorway, their arms laden with large black-covered ring binders which could be nothing less than master code files.

Then came the two scientists Solo and Illya had discovered at the top of the stairs, and then two more. Each man had his own burden of microfilm reels, notebooks or computer print-out paper.

The scientists ran across the hall, disappearing, as far as Napoleon could tell, into the solid wall on his side.

Across the way, Illya Kuryakin gestured with his pistol muzzle.

"An elevator. The door has already closed."

It happened so swiftly that Solo realized the THRUSH cryptographers must be following a pre-rehearsed escape plan formulated in the event of an emergency like this. He raced forward along the hall. The double doors slapped open. Three more burly THRUSH guards loomed, all with automatic weapons poised.

"All the way down!" Solo cried, throwing himself out prone on his face. Bullets ripped through the air where his midsection had been a moment ago.

Lying belly down, Illya remained cool enough to trigger a shot that spilled the first of the Thrushmen over backwards. His mates went down under him. One of the guards thus caught discharged his gun into his companion's elbow. The victim squealed.

Solo darted up to the tangle of arms and legs, rapped the butt of his pistol over all visible heads, then took a plunging step through the swing doors.

A high-ceilinged chamber, rock-walled like the rest of the fortress, housed a number of massive computers whose green and purple and amber lights flashed. Three programmer's stations were deserted, the comfortable chairs overturned. A bank of data transmission units along one wall hummed. The THRUSH cryptography center was deserted.

Illya Kuryakin stuck his head in from the hallway. Now that the odds were a little more in their favor, his blue eyes sparkled.

"Our little escaping birds can't have taken the elevator down, Napoleon."

"Right. Our informer told us there's no way out of here but the landing platform up above," Solo said.

"They must be huddling up there now!" Illya grinned. "Clutching all their valuable documents and tapes. Evidently THRUSH felt this station was so secure that only a minimum armed force was assigned. And we seem to have disposed of it. Shall we continue up the stairway and offer our scientific friends the opportunity to surrender themselves and their data?" Illya Kuryakin's bowl-bangs haircut and his thin, rather ascetic face heightened his air of macabre glee as he bowed in the direction of the stairs.

Napoleon Solo shrugged. He could breathe evenly again. His dark hair was damp with snow, and his rugged, good-looking face was red from the wind. He glanced at the computers.

"They're nice looking machines. Busily doing their jobs with no idea that their masters have left them. Shame we have to blow them up."

"We can do it later, Napoleon. Let's net the wiggling fish first."

As they started up the stairway, Solo grinned. "We didn't even need the 'copters."

"Perhaps now Mr. Waverly will consider that adjustment in our wages."

"I'll settle for a week in Nice. There's a certain French airline stewardess who does a very mean tango, and I promised—"

Solo stopped. Words clogged in his throat.

They had been climbing the stairway laughing, almost intoxicated by the sudden victory following the period of intense danger. They had reached the next highest level where a corridor branched off to the left, and it was down this corridor that Solo stared in disbelief.

Snow ghosted and whirled around the tips of his boots. Wind blasted him in the face from a doorway which stood open at the corridor's end.

"Where are they?" Solo

breathed. "Illya—*where are they?*"

The THRUSH technologists had vanished. Beyond the doorway, a bleak, snow-swept stone platform ran outward to end in a lip of rock. Illya searched the short cross-corridor here at the top of the stairs. A single door stood open. He ran to it, ducked inside, threw on a light switch, rushed back out.

"That's a barracks. It's empty."

"Then they have to be out there," Solo whispered, edging into the corridor leading to the outside.

Illya's mouth whitened at the corners. "Perhaps there are hiding places—"

"Yes, that's it. Got to be."

Back flat against the wall again, Napoleon Solo inched along. His pistol glinted in dull sunlight. The snow squall was breaking outside. A nearby peak shone golden-white. Fat clouds drifted past it.

The nearer Solo and Illya crept to the door leading outside, the more of the rough-hewn helicopter pad came into their line of vision.

It was empty.

Finally, after hesitating to draw a breath and take a firmer grip on their gun butts, the pair of .UN.C.L.E. agents tensed. Solo whispered, *"Now!"* They charged outside together.

Solo spun to the left. He dropped into a crouch again to fire if necessary. Moving right, Illya Kuryakin did the same. Their pistol muzzles pointed at the rocky face of the mountain rising above them.

The THRUSH helicopter platform was completely empty. Not a person was in sight.

Veils of snow whipped over it, stinging Solo's eyes. "Where in the name of all that's holy did they *go?*"

"There must have been a helicopter waiting for them," Illya suggested.

Suddenly, over the sunlit peak on the far side of the chasm, a chattering metal monster appeared. Then another, a third. The rotor noise fought against the wind, growing louder. Solo let out a shout, assuming that Illya's reasoning had been vindicated.

But the 'copters were not heading away. Bobbing erratically in the battering wind, they were landing.

The two agents hugged the platform's near wall as the unmarked choppers came down one by one. The rotos spun snowflakes into the sunlit air. The last of the squall had cleared. Solo ran forward, bending over to fight the blast of air from the blades as the pilot of the lead 'copter, a gum-chewing Englishman, slid back the port on his side.

"Napoleon Solo?" he shouted down. "Farmingham's my name. Sorry we're late. Ran into a bit of weather. You chaps seem in one piece. We assumed there'd be a battle royal in progress."

Inside the other 'copters settling to the platform, lean, professional U.N.C.L.E. operatives with impas-

sive faces could be seen. Their weapons glinted.

Napoleon Solo shouted up to the pilot: "The seven-man staff of cryptographers got away. Took off in a helicopter just before you got here."

The English pilot-operative looked dubious. "Old fellow, are you balmy?"

Illya Kuryakin joined Solo. "Of course he isn't. They had to take off. There is no other way out of the station. We came up behind them a few seconds too late. If your helicopters are properly powered, you should be able to catch the escape craft and bring it down."

Farmingham massaged his nose. "Did you actually see a chopper take those THRUSH chaps out of here?"

"No," Solo replied. "But they must have had one standing by here, just in case."

"Bit of a stew, isn't it?" Farmingham mused. Then he glanced down, eyes somber in the increasing brilliance of the Alpine sunlight. "You see, chaps, these choppers we came over in from Bern and Basel carry a ton of electronic gear. Radar and all that. My navigators were watching. There wasn't a blip. Not so much as one bloody blip. And we've been hovering in this snowy soup round about for nearly ten minutes, waiting for things to clear up. We'd have got some electronic pick-up of a craft. Maybe even a visual pick-up too."

"Something took those men off of this landing pad," Illya said.

"There were seven of them up here," Solo added. "And there's no other way down."

"Not unless they went up to heaven like angels," Farmingham said. The pilot-operative saw that his humor was unwelcome, rubbed his nose again. "I'm telling you. They didn't fly out in any ordinary aircraft."

"But they got off here somehow!" Solo insisted. "And they—what did you say?"

"What?" Farmingham blinked. "I said they didn't fly out in any ordinary aircraft. If they were traveling by air, chaps, than they were traveling in some type of craft we don't know about. Nothing outruns the electronic gear we've got aboard. You chaps ought to know that."

Illya's bangs blew in the wind. The sun was beginning to set. Sharp, blood-scarlet patterns etched by the fading light stained the man-made landing pad.

"How fast would a craft have to travel to escape detection by your gear?" he asked.

"Several hundreds of miles faster than anything that flies," said Farmingham.

"There could have been jamming equipment aboard a THRUSH plane," Solo suggested.

Now Farmingham was dead serious. "We carry the most sophisticated counter-jamming apparatus, Mr. Solo."

Angry, frustrated, Solo exploded, "What flies that fast, then? You tell me."

"Can't tell you, old chap," replied Farmingham somberly. "Because nothing does."

"Nothing," said Illya Kuryakin, "that we know about at this moment."

Solo's numbed fingers constricted into a fist. "Perhaps we've just found out about it."

Slowly the U.N.C.L.E. agents walked around the massive helicopters to the edge of the landing pad. The Alps spread out in savage, snowy panorama, tinged with sundown light. The skies were turning a luminescent vermilion in the east. The wind made Solo's cheeks hurt.

He wondered what could possibly have flown so swiftly, so elusively as to defy detection by the ultra-advanced hardware always carried aboard any U.N.C.L.E. aircraft.

A new THRUSH plane?

One capable of such fantastic speeds that it would be, for all practical purposes, incapable of detection?

Was it possible THRUSH had some hellish new sky-weapon at its disposal?

The empty world of Alps and sunset sky seemed to give back a frightening *yes.*

ACT I

WOULD YOU BELIEVE LITTLE GREEN MEN?

A WEEK LATER, toward ten in the evening, three men with grave faces discussed the baffling events that had taken place in the Swiss Alps, and tried to forecast what serious consequences those events might produce for their organization.

The men were Napoleon Solo, Illya Kuryakin, and their chief, Mr. Alexander Waverly, the number one man of Section I, Policy and Operations. They conducted their discussion in Mr. Waverly's office, a room equipped with computers, built-in TV monitors, and a large, circular, motorized conference table which revolved at the touch of a button. Few outsiders had ever seen the room. Fewer still of the mil-

lions in Manhattan were even aware that it existed.

The headquarters room was the strategic center of the entire U.N.C.L.E. complex, which was hidden away behind the facades of a row of buildings a few blocks from the United Nations enclave in New York's East Fifties. The buildings consisted of a large public parking garage, four dilapidated brownstones and a modern three-story whitestone.

The first two floors of the whitestone were occupied by an exclusive key-club restaurant, The Mask Club. On the third floor were sedate offices. These, a front, belonged to U.N.C.L.E. They interconnected with the maze of steel corridors and suites hiding away behind the decaying fronts of the brownstones.

There were four known entrances to the three-story U.N.C.L.E. complex, one being through the third-floor offices in the whitestone, and another through a carefully-contrived dressing room in Del Florio's tailor shop on the level just below the street.

Within U.N.C.L.E. headquarters proper there were no staircases. Four elevators handled all vertical traffic.

And inside the steel-walled rooms where signal lights of red, amber, purple, green, royal blue blinked constantly in coded sequences worked a crack team of alert young men and women of many races, creeds, colors and national origins.

The equipment installed for their use was the most sophisticated available. The complex devices for communication included high-powered shortwave antennas and elaborate receiving and sending gear hidden away behind a large neon advertising billboard on the roof.

Such were the resources of U.N.C.L.E. in Manhattan. But to Napoleon Solo and his companions on this particular night, they suddenly seemed far from adequate.

"I am sorry to say, Mr. Solo, that our search specialists have turned up nothing at all to suggest that THRUSH has been developing a super-secret aircraft of the type that you've conjured for us."

Mr. Alexander Waverly made this remark while tapping the stem of his perpetually empty pipe against the conference table. He was a middle-aged, rumpled man with a somewhat battered face. His hair was the neatest part of him, combed down on one side from a precise part. His clothes were the baggiest of Harris tweeds.

Deceptively slow to speak at times, Alexander Waverly was a seeming anachronism in the sleek metallic modernity of the conference room. But his looks and behavior failed to give an accurate reflection of the tough and tough-minded man he really was.

"Then we really have nothing on which to base our suspicions except

the mathematical certainty that no conventional aircraft could have eluded our helicopters in the time elapsed."

The speaker was Illya Kuryakin. He looked bookish and introverted as usual, his blond hair falling nearly to his blue eyes. His pensive face was troubled by a frown.

Napoleon Solo had long ago given up trying to make Illya dress smartly. His Russian peasant background was against him, for one thing. And Illya would much rather spend equivalent sums of money on hard-to-find jazz records.

To Illya's remark Mr. Waverly responded, "Yes, in the time interval between your arrival on the upper landing platform and the arrival of our aircraft—and even if we add in a few extra minutes for good measure—no airplane of ordinary design could have eluded you gentlemen and Farmingham, and done it both visually and electronically. Are you certain the gear in the 'copters registered nothing?"

"Nothing," Solo emphasized. "I teletyped Farmingham today. He reconfirmed it. He's just had all the gear dismantled and checked again. It was functioning perfectly."

Napoleon Solo's usual quick smile was gone now. His dark eyes brooded in the reflected glow from the computer lights flashing on the wall.

Solo and Illya sat in large, comfortable chairs at the conference table. Solo's shoes, seventy-five dollars the pair and hand-lasted in London, gleamed with a high luster. He wore dark slacks and a stylish double-breasted blazer with brass buttons. White silk handkerchief points protruded at his breast pocket.

"I can't help but think, sir," he said presently, "that we really unearthed a rat's nest with this airplane business. And I'm sorry."

"Better to unearth it now, Mr. Solo," Waverly said, "than to be surprised by it later."

"Yes, but we also let those cryptographers get away."

"I don't feel so badly on that score," Illya said. "We did go back and blow up the computers and dismantle the transmission machines. THRUSH had a sizeable sum of money invested in that European code system. We've eliminated the network, and discouraged similar experiments."

"Good positive thinking," remarked Mr. Waverly with a rather cross look. "You would do well to emulate your companion's attitude, Mr. Solo."

"How the devil can I do that?" Solo said, jumping up. "Here we sit, not knowing whether THRUSH has dreamed up some new aircraft that could tip the balance in their favor. Think of the logistical possibilities! Operatives delivered or rescued from any location on earth in a fraction of the time it takes a jet to do the job. It could give THRUSH a devastating advantage."

Mr. Waverly tick-tocked his pipe against the table. "It may be sheer fantasy, you know."

"Do you believe it's sheer fantasy, sir?" Illya asked.

Waverly's eyes grew somber. "How can I possibly answer? We have no concrete information. I have interrogated our agents all over the globe. There is no news of increased research operations, specialized purchases, shifts of THRUSH scientific personnel. But there is one disturbing bit of information which has surfaced in a dozen or more locales all around the world. Beirut, Bombay, Buenos Aires to name but three."

Solo felt a little heartened. "You mean information that tends to confirm THRUSH has something new? What's going on, sir?"

"Ah, oh," mused Waverly, "nothing is going on, Mr. Solo."

Illya Kuryakin brushed at his bangs. "Did we hear correctly, sir?"

"Quite correctly, I'm afraid. Reports have reached me to the effect that all THRUSH stations are abnormally quiet. Known operatives have not been seen in their usual haunts. THRUSH villainy has slacked off to a virtual standstill. It all seems to point to the period of calm which typically precedes an all-out offensive. Given a new type of military aircraft, THRUSH may be preparing another such offensive. And it behooves us to be prepared in turn."

Illya Kuryakin sighed. "Well, sir, since we have no solid leads, what do you suggest?"

"I suggest we adjourn for this evening. I hate to waste a moment when serious trouble may be brewing. On the other hand, a night's sleep may give us all some fresh insights. Oh, but I suppose you, Mr. Solo—" Waverly gestured to indicate Solo's sartorial splendor—"I suppose you have a date to do the night spots, eh?"

Solo checked his watch. Almost 10:30. "Thanks for reminding me, sir. I'm late already."

Waverly waved again. "Really, Mr. Solo, why must you always go running frantically round the gin mills and deadfalls? Couldn't you find some nice, quiet, thoughtful girl, perhaps within our own organization? A girl with whom you could share a good book, improve your mind?"

Solo looked moderately dismayed. "But, sir, I am going out with one of our own girls."

"You are? That's wonderful, my boy! Tell me, who is it?"

"Sabrina Slayton."

Waverly's eyes glowed. "Oh, yes. Miss Slayton. Section V. Very efficient girl. Bright, too. Tell me, are you going to catch a foreign film together?"

"No, sir," said Solo. "We're going to have dinner. Then we're going up to one of the discos. I hope it isn't treason to tell you, sir, but Miss Slayton loves to dance."

"I see," returned Mr. Waverly as though he had been wounded.

Solo laughed, called good night and shot out of the room and down the light-blinking corridor to the number two elevator. He was grateful for the banter that had helped erase, if only momentarily, the mounting tension building up because of the possibility of a new THRUSH offensive.

The elevator arrived. A pretty, dark-haired girl in a smart suit and a pleasant-faced, capable-looking fellow in Carnaby Street tweeds came up behind and got into the car with him.

"A penny, Mr. Solo," said the girl teasingly as the doors silently slid shut.

"April, that's your New England parsimony showing again," said the man. "A five-cent piece at least, can't you?"

Solo looked around. He smiled when he recognized two of his fellow agents, April Dancer and Mark Slate. "You two just coming in?"

April shook her head. "Afraid not. Just going out. Tokyo on the night plane."

The car stopped and Solo stepped forward to get off. "I don't know who's luckier. Things aren't too cheerful around here."

"Um, yes," Mark Slate agreed. "Old Alexander W. was a bit garrumphy with us earlier. Nasty old Dame Rumor is making the rounds, too."

"Talk of a big THRUSH push," April said. "Know anything about it?"

"Trying to find out," Solo said, leaving the car. "Luck, you two."

"Luck, Napoleon," April replied.

Slate waved and the closing doors hid them.

Solo walked past a busy lab where scientists were dismantling a captured THRUSH incendiary device masquerading as a portable weed sprayer, turned a corner at an L intersection and came face to face with a beautiful young lady tapping her foot.

"Hi," he said. "You look gorgeous, as usual."

"Thirteen minutes late, Mr. Solo," said Sabrina Slayton with a gleam in her violet eyes.

Solo inhaled the scent she wore, took her elbow, guided her quickly down the corridor toward the check-point.

"Sorry, Sabrina. Urgent conference with Mr. Waverly. I got so engrossed I forgot for about five minutes that—"

"Napoleon Solo, I don't know why I let you put me on the way you do. Everybody knows Mr. Waverly left headquarters at six o'clock tonight."

"Yes, but he came back at seven. Things really are in quite a state."

Sabrina's lovely face grew serious. "That bad, is it? Then I shouldn't have teased you. Can you tell me?"

They were at the check-point.

An electronic scanning beam played over their shoes, his brightly polished ones and Sabrina's bright scarlet evening pumps. Her cocktail dress matched her pumps, as did her bag and other accessories. The white eye of the scanning beam traveled slowly up over them as they stood waiting before an apparently blank steel wall.

Sabrina was a tall, graceful girl in her early twenties. Her violet eyes sparkled with animation. She had advanced three grades in Section V, Communications and Security in just a year. With this talent she combined a fashion model's taste for smart clothes, which fitted her superb figure splendidly.

"Tell you?" Solo repeated. "I wish I could. I'd better not until Waverly issues a directive to the whole organization. We may be borrowing trouble, but really I don't think—"

He bit off his words. *But I don't think we are,* his mind finished. Whatever it was, highly advanced jet airplane or modified helicopter, Solo was convinced that some kind of new and sinister means of transportation was now the property of THRUSH.

And in a world-wide battle of the kind U.N.C.L.E. waged around the clock, transportation was a key. Careful logistics planning and a capability for swift movement were often all that stood between the collapse of a tenuous balance of terror in the world. If THRUSH acquired

the means to move men and materiel faster than U.N.C.L.E. could—

Sabrina linked her arm in his. The warm, exhilarating pressure of her gloved fingers brought him awake. She added, "The door's been open a whole minute."

Solo saw that the steel portal had slid aside, and also the inch-thick reinforced glass barrier beyond. He forced a smile. In a moment, with a little more effort, it became genuine as they entered the darkened halls of the whitestone. They took the elevator down to Del Florio's.

"No gloom," Solo promised. "Absolutely no gloom tonight. Only guaranteed non-stop hilarity." And he caught her by the waist and whirled her against a section of wall which promptly revolved them into the steamy tailor shop.

Mr. Del Florio jerked the pad of the steam presser down onto a pair

of pants and did not give them a second glance as they exited to the street arm in arm.

A light rain was falling. The street reflected car lights and colorful neon signs in glistening squiggles. Traffic was not especially heavy, since it was a little while until the theatres let out. Solo and Sabrina waited in the protection of Del Florio's for about five minutes until a vacant cab came along. Napoleon Solo whistled and dashed out from the curb.

He handed Sabrina inside, gave the address of a posh French restaurant, The Bonaparte, a few blocks uptown.

"Always like to patronize a relative," he said as he ducked to jump in after her.

A burst of headlights caught his eye. The headlights belonged to a car parked further down the block behind them. Solo thought no more about it until Sabrina turned round in the seat when they had gone about a block.

"Napoleon, can you tell whether that car following us is a taxi?"

Solo craned. Their own cab turned a corner. As the car behind passed into the light of the intersection, Solo sighted an orange-yellow fender.

"Yes, I think it is. Why?"

Sabrina shrugged. "Oh, I just thought—never mind." She put her glove into his hand. "No gloom. No brooding. You promised and so do I. Tell me as much as you can about the Alps affair. Did you meet any female skiers?"

"Swinging from a rope at several thousand feet? Are you kidding?"

The conversation took off from there, warm, intimate, easy-going. Solo liked Sabrina very much. Their work was a common bond. Their mutual attraction was an even stronger one. Solo had almost forgotten about the latest THRUSH threat by the time the cab pulled up.

A gold-braided doorman handed them out under a discreet neon sign reading The Bonaparte. Solo noticed Sabrina search the street behind them. No other car moved for an interval of two blocks. But she appeared concerned all the same. Her eyes were troubled as they went up the wide granite steps and into the candlelit, velvet-walled charm of the restaurant.

The *maitre d'* greeted Solo in French. Solo replied affably in the same language. They were escorted to a secluded corner table.

Shortly a wine steward was hovering beside them, along with several other waiters, water-pourers, napkin-folders and other functionaries, all of whom wore dark gold-frogged waistcoats and satin breeches.

The restaurant, Solo thought, was a different world. Here there was no struggle, no THRUSH, no death. Here were only release from tensions, the aromas of fine cuisine and old wine, the muted loveliness

of the attractive young girl across the table.

Solo reached out, squeezed her hand. Sabrina glanced up from the giant gold-embossed menu. Her smile was warm and heartfelt.

By the time they had worked their way through several courses and arrived at the cognac in costly crystal snifters, a trio of strolling musicians had arrived on the scene, softly playing *Mademoiselle de Paris*. The dinner conversation had ranged over dozens of innocuous topics unrelated to the deadly spying trade. They'd discussed everything from the fortunes of the Manhattan pro football teams to the antics of women's hemlines.

Still, Solo was nagged by the anxiety Sabrina had shown in the taxi. He decided to check on it.

"As soon as we finish, how about going up to The Insider? If I can climb a Swiss mountain, I imagine I'm in shape for frugging to some of that electronic music."

Sabrina smiled. "I'd love to. My, this is marvelous brandy. Expensive?"

"Mr. Waverly can afford it." Carefully he added, "The club isn't more than a block or two. We can walk if you have a thing about taxicabs these days."

Sabrina's hand shook noticeably. She set the snifter down on the damask.

"You're being so oblique you're obvious." Trying to make it a joke, she half-smiled.

"Guess I am at that. You don't have to tell me, of course. But you did look a bit shaken on the ride up here."

In the candlelit softness where the music beat, Sabrina said, "We were being followed."

"By a cab? Yes, I thought so at first. But it disappeared before we got here."

"It's around," Sabrina replied firmly. "It'll be back. Or one like it."

Now Solo began to sense the serious undertone in her carefully controlled voice. "Sabrina, I think you'd better tell me what this is all about."

Rather nervously, Sabrina gave a small shrug. "I don't know. That's what makes it so puzzling. I don't know whether something really is the matter, or whether it's just fatigue catching up. Section V has been on double-time lately. I've worked extra a lot. The old beauty-sleep routine has gone by the boards many a night. I don't think too clearly when I'm tired. That's why I'm not certain that I've really seen what I think I have."

Solo quirked an eyebrow. "Sounds bizarre. What did you see? General De Gaulle marching down Fifth Avenue in an American Legion uniform?"

The lovely blonde girl managed a laugh. "No, a taxi. A yellow taxi. It cruises along about a block behind me when I walk to work. And when I go home in the evening."

"How long has this been going on?"

"A week. Perhaps a week and a half."

"Are you certain it's the same taxi every time?"

"I'm not certain at all, Napoleon. Don't you understand? It might be coincidence—"

"But there just might be something behind it. Has this taxi tried to pick you up?"

Sabrina frowned. "Never. That's the most peculiar part. If I get off very late, I always take a cab, even though it's only a few blocks. Usually there's a cab waiting at the stand on the corner near headquarters. You know, down in front of The Mask Club. But it's never the taxi that's following me. That cab is always parked somewhere else nearby, with the lights out."

Solo's nerves tightened up a notch. "Did you report it?"

"I haven't yet, simply because nothing has actually happened. I'm almost to the point where I want to report it, though. It's making me nervous."

Quickly, Sabrina finished her brandy, closing her eyes as she swallowed. Then her violet eyes glowed again. Her smile returned.

"I feel better now that I've told somebody. As I say, maybe I've simply been worn out, imagined things. Maybe I've mixed up several different cabs—"

Solo summoned the waiter with a flourish. "Could be, Sabrina. I won't give you any stuffy lectures about the seemingly odd ways our little friends sometimes work. Let me bring it up to Waverly, though. As if it just started yesterday. If I pretend it hasn't been happening for more than a week, the chief won't give you any stuffy little lectures either, about how you should have reported it right away. But he may want to assign a man to check it out."

"I know I should have said something sooner," Sabrina admitted as Solo counted off bills for the check and tip, whose sumptuous sizes matched the sumptuous meal they'd consumed. "But I didn't want to bother anyone if it's just a lot of girlish vaporing."

They left the restaurant proper and crossed the elegant foyer where an ormolu clock ticked. The *maitre d'* bid them good evening. Napoleon Solo opened the main door. Sabrina passed through onto the wide granite stoop.

And right there Sabrina Slayton's relief ended.

TWO

ITS ROOF shining a dull, deep yellow in the rain, a taxi with lights off and the right rear door open sat at the curb. Oddly, its very emptiness had the power to terrify.

Napoleon Solo glanced left and right along the rain-slicked street. A large truck was passing at the next intersection. A block down,

two sailors walked along. Sabrina seized his arm. He could feel the sudden, reasonless terror in her as she stared at the taxi and whispered:

"Oh, Napoleon. It's back again, damn it."

"You folks are going with me," said a strange, wheezy voice out of the dark. "Get into the hack before I got to shoot one of you."

Solo whipped his head to the left. Out of the darkness of an entrance-way to a lower floor apartment, an entrance-way situated directly adjacent to the Bonaparte's granite steps, a huge man materialized, a comic horror of a man, weighing between two hundred and fifty and three hundred pounds.

The man wore outlandish checkered slacks, a white shirt that stretched tent-like over an immense belly, a battered brown leather jacket and a worn-out cap with a metal tag on the right side. He had a huge pie face. His fat pink cheeks glistened with rain. He wore black-rimmed spectacles, and his eyes behind the lenses were tiny and nervous. *Blink, blink, blink.*

In his porky-fingered right hand the man gripped a .38 revolver. It was pointed directly at Napoleon Solo's shirt bosom. The man's little mouth puckered as he said: "I ain't kidding around. I'm dead serious. You two get in the hack before somebody gets hurt."

"Are you the man who's been following this young lady?" Solo asked.

His loud tone was partially effective. The stranger stepped back a pace, as though someone had slapped him with a wet fish.

"We'll get to the questions later. Just get in the hack."

The man glanced frantically along the street.

"Quick, before anybody comes! I'm warning you both, I'm a desperate man. Very desperate," he was almost shouting now.

A pause.

"Please, I ain't kidding."

For a minute Napoleon Solo wanted to laugh. The fat man's puffing and panting made him comic. The .38, on the other hand, had the blue-shining solidity of the real article. And Solo didn't laugh because he was well aware of the high percentage of homicidal maniacs, jolly fellows at first glance, who were at large in the melting pot of Manhattan.

Sabrina's gloved fingers dug Solo's arm as she said, "We'd better do as he says, Napoleon. At least you see now that I wasn't dreaming."

"No, my dear, you weren't." Solo's face was mask-like as he tensed. "And I agree, we should accommodate this gentleman immediately. Let me step aside. You precede me into the vehicle."

The fat man's blink rate increased to a near-blinding speed. "Cut out the fancy jabber! Get in

the hack and no more code words, I'm a desperate man!"

Napoleon Solo's eyes took on a strange glint. As Sabrina went down the steps past him, he said in a dead level voice, "Yes, you've already told us that. But I'm a desperate man too—"

And Solo was moving, left hand out to seize the granite railing of the restaurant steps, right leg up and over in a flashing vault.

"—desperate to avoid the company of you and yours at THRUSH."

Down Solo went across the stone rail, feet first. He crashed into the upholstered corporation of the would-be kidnaper.

The fat man reeled backwards. His face broke into a sudden, terrified snarl. Solo's heels had jammed deep in the fat man's belly, while his superbly conditioned body twisted in mid-air. He intended to come down hard but squarely on his feet. He reckoned without the amazing recovery powers of the fat man.

The man jiggled off balance like an elephantine ballerina. But suddenly he righted himself, just at the instant Solo's heels hit the pavement. The fat man lashed out with his gun hand. The muzzle of the .38 connected with Solo's left temple. He was jolted back against the concrete building front. Blazing constellations lit up the inside of his head.

"*Told* you I was desperate," the fat man panted. "You're just causing me trouble. It's the broad I want." The blue-solid muzzle of the .38 flashed at Napoleon Solo's head again.

Solo threw out his right fist to block the blow. Determined and hellishly strong for a man with so much blubber on him, the man batted Solo's arm aside.

Sabrina cried out in fear. With a grunt, the fat man whipped the .38 down, pasting Solo across the scalp. Solo's legs turned to jellied bouillon.

"You better believe I'm a desperate man," said the attacker, like a broken record.

Solo wanted to tell him that he believed, he believed. Unfortunately he lost consciousness before he could.

THREE

THE VOICES, unfamiliar and off-key, came filtering to his mind as though through an echo chamber.

"Real sorry I had to hit your boy friend so hard. He punches real good for a clothes-horse."

In the twilight deeps of semi-consciousness, Solo stirred resentfully. His eyelids felt as though they were weighted with several pounds of lead shot each. His body was twisted into an uncomfortable twisted position. Some kind of serrated surface went *bump-and-rattle, rattle-and-pitch* underneath him. It wasn't too good for the stomach.

Was that Sabrina speaking now?

"—he's a very tough man. When he wakes up, you'll be sorry, I promise. Our organization will—"

"Hey, lady! You said *our* organization." The voice, Napoleon Solo now realized, belonged to the mastodon who had knocked him out. "You both work for he same outfit? You both work for U.N.C.L.E.?"

"You know we do," Sabrina sounded surprisingly cool now that the tension and uncertainty were over and the situation had resolved itself. "THRUSH knows everything. Isn't that what they drum into your demented little heads?"

Good for you, Solo thought. He got some of the lead shot off his eyelids and tried to straighten up. There was a peculiar, protesting gurgle from up ahead as the man said:

"THRUSH? Never heard of it. What is it, some bird society like them nuts that get up before sunrise in Central Park to watch robins and get mugged? Listen, lady, I don't work for nobody but myself and the Lightning Cab Company. There, see? It says right on the license over the meter. Jackie Woznusky, Lightning Cabs. That's my picture. Don't it look like me?"

"I'll admit it does," Sabrina answered. "And if this is a THRUSH ploy, it's the strangest—"

"It's positively insane," Napoleon Solo groaned, straightening up in the rear seat of the moving taxi

where Jackie Woznusky, Hack License #2278, had apparently dumped him.

Solo rubbed his skull. Through the windshield he caught flashes of night neon on rainy pavement. The hackie was driving with his left hand, and driving expertly at that. With his right he brandished the .38 in a way which failed to make Solo feel very secure. The man didn't handle firearms as though he knew how dangerous they could be.

The cabbie exclaimed: "I see you sitting up back there. No funny stuff or I'll get rough again."

Sabrina's face was pale in the gloom of the rear seat as she turned toward him. "Napoleon, are you all right?"

"Just suffering from a slightly wounded ego. This fat ape got the better of me. He won't next time."

"Don't talk that way!" Jackie Woznusky sounded hurt. "I didn't want to sap you. You just butted in.

All I wanted to do is talk to the lady. I gotta talk to somebody from that U.N.C.L.E. outfit. I been to everybody else. I been to the Federal building, the FBI, the police.

"They all want me to fill out forms and go talk to some professor who works for the Air Force. I know what the Air Force thinks. I said no thanks. It's driving me outa my skull. Even my own mother and my brother Leo think I'm ready for the funny farm."

"Shrewd fellow, that Leo," Solo muttered under his breath. "Where the devil are we?"

Jackie Woznusky glanced out the window as he tooled around a parked truck with one-handed ease.

"That there's the Presbyterian hospital. We're heading up into Westchester County."

"A lovely spot to be disposed of," Solo growled. "If you know we work for U.N.C.L.E.—by the way, how do you know what U.N.C.L.E. is?"

"I had this fare one time, going out to LaGuardia. I picked him up just outside your building. Guy who acted like he was on the lam. He was carrying this damn cage full of white mice—"

Sabrina clapped her hands softly. "So that's what became of our friend Wheatley, the double agent, a year ago."

"Maybe," Solo nodded. "Out the front door with the research animals from his lab and then out to the airport. I wasn't around. I heard about it later. All our men went to Kennedy. Evidently it was the wrong airport. Jackie—" Solo faced front again. "Did this man with the mice tell you about us?" he asked.

"Yeah, he was cussin' and spittin' about U.N.C.L.E. something awful. He was sort of a creepy foreign type so I figured your organization must be okay. When I started getting the run-around from the FBI and everybody else, I remembered U.N.C.L.E. I asked a couple of my fares about it. They'd heard of the outfit, okay. Didn't know where it was, though.

"I knew because I'd carried this guy who'd been there. I decided I hadda talk to somebody from U.N.C.L.E. once I found out it was a bunch of people that were strictly patriotic but who do things sometimes in a kind of nutty way."

Woznusky panted on breathlessly, sounding less hostile, less menacing by the moment.

"I figured maybe U.N.C.L.E. would listen to me. So I hung around until I spotted this young lady comin' out of that whitestone three nights running. I started following her. As soon as I seen she kept funny hours, I knew she must work for your bunch.

"I ain't the bravest guy in the world, when it comes right down to it. I wanted to pick a better time and place to say something. But I ain't been able to sleep. I keep this rod in the car in case of muggers.

So tonight—well, I just decided I couldn't wait any longer.

"Now I find out you work for U.N.C.L.E. too, mister. And that's a break. Maybe one of you will believe me. I don't want to hurt you. I just want to talk."

Solo leaned back, grinning. "Jackie, I almost do believe you."

"It's true!" protested the cabbie. "On a stack of Bibles I'm willing to swear! Also on my father's grave, God bless him. I saw it. I really saw it."

The cab rolled ahead through the rain. In Woznusky's half-literate speech there was an odd, low note of terror that gave Napoleon Solo pause. He asked: "What did you see, Jackie?"

"I seen a flying saucer."

After a long silence Sabrina Slayton sighed, "Oh good Lord."

"Lady, I *seen* it! Would I tell a fib on my father's sainted grave? Not old Jackie W.!"

Solo tried to keep a straight face. "You saw a flying saucer. And the FBI wanted you to tell the Air Force about it? That's standard operating procedure, Jackie. The Air Force checks out such things because most people who say they saw apparitions in the sky really saw something else. They saw a weather balloon, a reflection of another aircraft, a—"

Aircraft? Napoleon Solo's scalp crawled.

Jackie said: "I didn't see the thing in the sky. I seen it sitting on the ground, up here in this deserted part of Westchester. That's where I'm taking you right now, to show you. Can I put the gun up? I'd feel a lot better driving with two hands. This traffic is murder."

A small tic began to work in Napoleon Solo's cheek. "Yes, Jackie. You can put the gun up. We'll go along. Won't we, Sabrina?"

Solo looked earnestly into her violet eyes. She was plainly baffled. His voice dropped low.

"Sabrina, there's a wild outside chance that Jackie's story could be very important to U.N.C.L.E. I want to check it out."

"It's important to me," Jackie Woznusky said. "Everybody thinks I'm nuts all of a sudden. I sit around worryin' that maybe I am. I take those sleeping pills they advertise on the teevee but they don't help. I keep seeing this big shining thing, round and covered with light—"

Napoleon Solo laid a hand on the partition separating front and rear seats. "Jackie, my name is Napoleon Solo. This is Miss Slayton. It's true we both work for U.N.C.L.E. And for a rather peculiar reason that even Miss Slayton doesn't understand, I want to hear your story. When did you spot this thing you believe is a saucer?"

Jackie scratched his porcine chin. "I'll never forget it. Two weeks ago Thursday."

"Start at the beginning."

"Jeez, somebody's finally going

to listen to me like I got some brains left!"

The fat cabbie whipped the yellow vehicle around a lagging produce truck and shot it up the rain-slicked approach ramp to an expressway that would carry them out into Westchester County. He drove fast and well. Before long they had left Manhattan and the Bronx behind. The cab slipped through the night on a route roughly paralleling the Hudson River. The night rain had congealed to a mist. The windshield wipers tick-tocked steadily while Jackie Woznusky talked.

His husky, uncertain voice carried a note of hesitant conviction that made the hair on Solo's neck prickle. Sabrina, not understanding completely, still caught the mood of eeriness as the hack driver told his story while the cab rolled north in the misty dark.

FOUR

On the particular evening in question, Jackie Woznusky had picked up a fare in the theatre district just after the plays and musicals let out. The person was an elderly lady who wanted to be cabbed up into Westchester. She was going to stay overnight with her niece. The niece lived near the commuter town of Dobbs Ferry.

Jackie took the fare. He deposited the old lady at a secluded farmhouse, headed back for Manhattan and discovered after he was ten minutes on the road that he'd made a wrong turn.

"Finally I seen a road marker. I stopped to check the map and find out where I was. While I was parked on the shoulder readin' the map, all of a sudden I noticed this weird light from a field. I got out. I dunno why, except I figured maybe it was a fire on a farm and somebody night need help. Well, it was darker than my Uncle Melvin's penny-pinching heart. I'll tell you that. All except where this glow come from behind a hill. I went runnin' up the hill and when I got to the top I nearly had the heart failure."

Jackie Woznusky half-turned, as though to convince them by the earnestness of his expression that he was serious. The lenses of his spectacles shone eerily in the reflected glow of the dash lights.

"There it was, this metal—*thing*. I knew right away it was a flyin' saucer because I seen drawings of ones like it. You know, in magazines. I always figured the people who saw such were wiggy, flippo, you know? But there it was, down in this little valley. The light kind of shone out from it, all golden-pink. I nearly fainted four or five times."

Solo said, "Jackie, approximately how big was the UFO?"

"UFO? Oh, unidentified flying object, right? It wasn't flying, but it was huge."

"Fantastic," Solo said. "Mr. Waverly will think I've gone round the bend too."

Suddenly Napoleon Solo's common sense took over. He realized he was groping blindly, seizing the first explanation, however irrational, to the mystery of a new THRUSH aircraft. UFOs in all sizes and configurations had been reported regularly for the last couple of decades. Sometimes the people who saw them were less than reliable mentally.

Why was there any reason to believe Jackie Woznusky was well-balanced, or that he had actually seen what he reported?

Cautiously Solo asked, "Were there any people around this saucer, Jackie?"

"Yeah," Jackie said. "This is the part that made the FBI men look at me like I was loony. Maybe I am. Around the bottom of the saucer, see, kind of near a sort of ladder going up to the thing, there were five or six—"

Jackie leaned on the horn, passed an expensive limousine crawling along the dim road.

"—five or six little green men."

Sabrina giggled.

"I knew it! I knew you'd laugh!" Jackie wailed in piteous tones. "But I really seen them. Little green men with pop eyes and funny feelers sticking out of their heads. They were marching around and around in a circle."

Solo's right eyebrow crooked up. "The—uh—space creatures were *marching?*"

"Yeah, honest. I knew that if I didn't get out of there, I'd have a heart attack on the spot. I ran back to my hack, jumped in and went twenty miles over the speed limit all the way back to the city. I had six bourbons and hit the sack. In the morning, I couldn't get it out of my mind. That's why I went to the Federal building first."

Jackie's tiny eyes shone behind his glasses as he finished, "Maybe we'll see it tonight again. I swear I didn't make it up. It was real. I swear!"

"Well, Jackie," said Solo in his most soothing tone, "we'll certainly check it out. You didn't want to go dancing anyway, did you, Sabrina?"

"I'd much prefer dancing," she replied tartly, "since I don't know why you're so interested in all of this."

He patted her gloved hand as Jackie swung the hack through the outskirts of Dobbs Ferry. "Why, Sabrina, I want to visit the spot as a favor to our friend Mr. Woznusky."

Dolorously Jackie announced, "I can tell."

"You can tell what?" asked Solo.

"That you think I'm a funny farm candidate too. I was nuts to think anybody would listen, even U.N.C.L.E. I shouldn't of jumped you. I'm sorry. We'll go back to town." He braked the cab.

"No, Jackie. Keep going," said Solo. "We won't find a thing, I'll wager. That may be all to the good. I don't believe your story. But I don't think you're lying, either. I think you saw *something* and you convinced yourself you saw something else. What's happened to you has happened to plenty of other perfectly normal people. It's no crime. Let's go look at the field."

Jackie pondered in silence. "It's a deal. At least you folks are bein' decent about it. I appreciate that."

Napoleon Solo was irritated with himself. Poor Woznusky actually believed the wild tale. And for an instant Solo had swallowed it. He'd thought that perhaps, by accident, he had stumbled onto an answer to the Swiss Alps riddle which was plaguing U.N.C.L.E. In the aftermath of false hope, he felt foolish.

Shortly the hack turned off onto a side road. Mist-dampened fence posts ghosted by in the wash of the headlights. The interior of the cab had grown cold. Few lights showed anywhere. A white road marker rose up, dropped behind. Jackie slowed down, began counting to himself:

"—eight posts. Six. Yeah, there's the tobacco sign hanging on that fence. The field is right up ahead, on the left. It all comes back to me now."

He cut across the road, pulled up on the shoulder and jerked the emergency brake.

Sheepishly he said, "We don't have to get out."

"Of course we're going to get out." Solo levered the door open.

Sabrina sighed, less enthusiastically, "Of course we are."

Dampness clutched at their faces. Perhaps a mile away, a dim yellow blur indicated another vehicle passing on another road. After a moment Napoleon Solo could make out the silhouette of a fairly large hill on their left.

Sabrina gripped his arm, whispering, "You're a lunatic. But a very kind and understanding one." She moved ahead a foot or so into the high, damp weeds. Jackie was out in front of them by three yards.

"I sure don't see any lights back there now." His voice sounded eerily distant. "Listen, if you folks really want to go back—"

"Let's climb the hill and have a look." Solo was trying to make a lark of it because the whole excursion was obviously so useless. Why did he have to be so soft-hearted sometimes? Just because an overweight cabbie had hallucinations—

"Is that you, Napoleon?" It was Sabrina's voice, from several feet away. "Your hand is cold as an ice cube."

They'd gotten separated. In the dark it wasn't hard.

Solo called: "That isn't my hand you're holding, Sabrina. Jackie—"

"It ain't mine either." Jackie sounded even more distant. "It must—hey! *Who is it?*"

Hearing a strange, sibilant rustling in the weeds, Solo knew they were not alone. Automatically his hands dropped to his jacket. Then he remembered. His attire for an evening of pleasure didn't include a weapon.

Sabrina called out, "Napoleon, I—"

Suddenly her voice was cut off as though someone had seized her around the mouth.

"Hang on, Sabrina!" Solo shouted, charging straight into the dark. A very large, powerful fist met his face with murderous force.

Solo let out a shout, swung automatically. His own first connected with a leather-jacketed midsection. Solo thought he'd struck Jackie by accident until the unseen adversary gave him a cruel kneelift in the middle.

Solo tumbled backwards into the weeds, thrashed, came up on all fours. A foot bashed the side of his head. Over he went again, frantically grabbing for the foot and twisting.

The attacker let out a hoarse shout of pain. Solo lurched to his feet and punched hard into the dark where he thought he heard sibilant breathing. He struck empty air.

He hit again. This time he connected with a head. His knuckles brushed something solid, glass-like, where the eyes should be. He realized that his attackers—there were at least three—were wearing

some sort of bulbous night-goggles which enabled them to see him.

"Jackie? Sabrina?" he shouted. "Stick together. Don't get separat —oof!"

A heavy fist belted him twice in the belly. Solo fought back. His knuckles broke a lens of the man's special goggles. Another man leaped on him from behind. Solo elbowed him expertly and hard, shucked him off, and with his head lowered, began to run back toward the roadway.

He needed light, light to see the field, the faceless phantoms he was fighting. With the breath tearing in and out of his lungs, he made it to the hack in seconds. Thank God Jackie had left his keys! Solo started the engine, yanked the light switch, went into reverse and backed around so that the headlights speared into the field. He kicked on the brights. Whiteness leaped ahead—

Shining on emptiness.

Weeds stirred in the faint mist. Nothing else moved.

Panting, Napoleon Solo ran back into the field. He reached the top of the large hill and pelted down the other side. Shouting, calling their names, he moved back and forth across the area for the better part of twenty minutes.

Then he stopped. Tie askew, face beaded with perspiration in spite of the night's chill, he walked slowly back down into the field near the road.

He'd made a gamble when he dashed to turn on the hack lights. He'd lost.

Alone in the field, Solo walked toward the silent, accusing white circles of the headlights.

He was alone. The attackers, Sabrina Slayton and Jackie Woznusky had vanished as though none of them had ever existed.

ACT II

"TAKE ME TO YOUR LETHAL LEADER"

NAPOLEON SOLO whispered, "I think we are about to see our flying saucer."

In reply Illya Kuryakin said, "I will believe in UFOs, Napoleon, if and when I see one."

Solo pointed with a black-gloved hand. "What do you call that?"

In a voice as tense as Solo's, Illya said, "Offhand, it rather resembles the opening of the doors of Hades as visualized by the poet Dante."

"Except that this time, the doors of Hades happen to be horizontal. That's the ground of good old New York State opening up."

And so it was, down there at the bottom of the little valley behind the large hill. Moments ago there had been only darkness and the high, chilly shine of stars over the lonely countryside.

It was almost four in the morning, approximately twenty-eight hours after Napoleon Solo had left this very same field and driven Jackie Woznusky's hack back to Manhattan.

A moment ago the bottom of the little valley which Solo and Illya were watching from the hilltop concealment of some shrubbery had begun to glow with an eerie thread of light. This golden-pink line of brilliance bisected the valley at an angle. The line of light was perhaps a hundred yards long end to end. A faint grind and whine, as of immense machinery moving, disturbed the nighttime silence.

A pair of huge horizontal doors were camouflaged with dirt and living soil and plants. The doors were sliding back. The bright line widened, widened still further. Up from the subterranean opening thus revealed, the strange and brilliant golden-pink glow shone.

Solo's eyes strained to capture every detail. But he could see little of what filled the immense opening

in the ground. The light was too blinding.

Suddenly Solo dug his gloved fingers into his companion's arm. "*There*, Illya. Something is coming up from underground."

"Forgive me, my friend," Illya breathed. "You aren't crazy after all. Mr. Waverly and I thought so last night, you know, when you rousted us from our beds and made us come down and listen to that fantastic story of how Sabrina and the cab driver disappeared. But now—now I believe you."

Illya Kuryakin hunched forward on his elbows, pushing aside a low branch of the scraggly shrub behind which they'd been stretched out on their bellies since sunset.

Both agents wore tight-fitting night guerrilla outfits with snug hoods, plus special shoes whose crepe soles had small compartments in them. The faces of the U.N.C.L.E. agents were partially hidden by the fat lenses of infra-red goggles. Solo had decided that if the enemy found goggles a good idea, they could use the same gambit. The remaining exposed portions of their faces were smeared with blacking.

They were as invisible as men could be at night, lying there with long-muzzled pistols at their elbows, watching the incredible scene below.

The still air groaned with the sound of another huge piece of machinery being switched on. From the huge, glowing hole in the earth, a metallic object of some size rose steadily, as though on a powered lift. The upper surface of the object was curved. And as more and more the monstrous thing appeared, it assumed an all-too-familiar shape.

Bathed in the pink-yellow glow of lights shining from below, a circular metal craft about seventy yards in diameter came up into sight. On top the metallic disc bulged to form a dome. Shadows denoted view ports or windows in the dome. Beneath the craft, a dozen rod-like legs supported it on the motorized platform on which it was riding upward.

As soon as the huge steel platform reached ground level, the false doors in the earth began to slide shut. The tips of the craft's legs seemed to be equipped with rollers which rode up onto the shutting doors.

When the outside legs were on the doors, the central legs drew up off the platform. The platform dropped away. The camouflaged doors shut with a loud clang.

Even with the light from below-ground gone, the metal skin of the craft radiated a faint golden-pink glow. A kind of telescoping ladder unfolded from the upper dome. Its lower end nudged the ground. A door slid up in the side of the curved dome. Out flew something small, thrown hard. It landed on the earth, glowing eerily green.

Illya Kuryakin gasped. Napoleon Solo said nothing. A strange, tight knot of tension had suddenly loosened inside of him. He felt relaxed as he had not felt relaxed since facing Mr. Waverly and Illya at headquarters in the small hours last night. At that time Solo told the incredible story of Jackie Woznusky, the fight in the field, and the disappearance of Solo's companions.

TWO

"IT IS A lunatic's tale, Mr. Solo," Waverly said. He looked sleepy.

"But that's why Woznusky came to us in his own crude, frightened way," Solo said. "He knew that U.N.C.L.E. was unconventional enough to give him a hearing."

"Very well," Mr. Waverly answered. "I am conventional enough to believe that the affair has some other, logical explanation. THRUSH may be at the heart of it, yes. But flying saucers? No, Mr. Solo, I'm afraid not. On the other hand, I realize your concern for Miss Slayton and the cab driver. I also appreciate that THRUSH has, in the past, moved in bizarre avenues of research.

"Therefore I will be unconventional enough to assign you and Mr. Kuryakin to survey that field very carefully tomorrow night. Mr. Kuryakin, please don't roll your eyes. Let's humor Mr. Solo in this, shall we?"

"Of course," Illya replied. "We'll have a delightful time hunting for gnomes, elves, and other hallucinations in Westchester County. Napoleon, I'm afraid I can't really believe—"

"Don't pre-judge it, Illya," Solo said in a tight voice. "Not until we check for sure."

At dark earlier this same night, Solo and Illya had driven up into the county. They parked on a dirt road a full mile away. They walked cross-country to approach the hill-shielded valley from a different direction. They bellied carefully up to the hilltop and sank into place behind the scraggly shrubs and settled down to a long, probably fruitless wait in the chill silence.

The hours dragged on. The night crept away. And just when Solo was beginning to give up, beginning to think that maybe he too needed the kind of psychiatric help people recommended to those who saw UFOs in the sky or on the ground, the earth began to open slowly.

There it was before them now, burning golden-pink. The very same kind of gigantic, saucer-shaped metal craft which had been dismissed as hoax, mirage or otherwise explainable phenomenon by hundreds of so-called experts over the past two decades.

Another of those small, green-glowing shapes was hurled from the open upper door of the craft. Solo ripped off his infra-red gog-

gles to see better. "Good Lord!"

"I am seeing things," Illya breathed. "Specifically, little green men."

Out shot another. Another. Soon half a dozen were lying inert near the base of the craft. Each one had a humanoid shape. Each gave off a phosphorescent greenish glow. From bulbous little heads greenish feelers protruded. The tiny creatures were no more than two feet long.

From the shadow-black doorway of the saucer-shaped craft a voice could be heard:

"That's the last of the little beggars. More trouble than they're worth. Give 'em a double blast of juice. Let's put on a real show in case any of the farmers around here are up early."

A high-pitched warbling tone split the darkness. Solo's jaw dropped another inch as the half dozen little creatures jerked upright and, with awkward movements, began to form a line.

Their antennae quivered. Their round greenish eyes shone brightly as they began to walk, one behind another, in a circle.

Dimly understanding, Solo growled, "I want one of those."

On his feet, Napoleon Solo crashed out past the scraggly shrubbery and bolted down the hill. He watched the shadowy doorway of the craft as he ran, angling over toward where the little greenish men were moving round and round in monotonous, jerk-legged rhythm.

Illya Kuryakin came scrambling right behind. The muzzles of their pistols glittered in the glow of the saucer craft's metallic skin. Wild and fantastic as it was, Solo thought he saw the pattern. THRUSH had developed a highly specialized, infinitely advanced aircraft during the decade or so. The research program accounted for the myriad of UFO sightings made world-wide, and for the large percentage that government agencies had never explained.

And as he ran, ducking in toward those marching green men, Solo also guessed something about the line of little green marching figures.

He guessed they were dolls.

"Napoleon! Watch the saucer!"

Solo had reached the bottom of the hill. He twisted his head up, saw one of the dome ports fly back. A shiny rod poked out. The rod proved to be a conventional-sounding gun barrel which began to burp and stutter.

Bullets hit the earth all around him, sending up spurts of dust. Solo dodged and twisted like a broken-field runner.

A second port sprouted a gun. Solo slammed onto his face to avoid crossfire.

The hatchway of the saucer began to close. The stairs began to telescope upward. Confused voices sounded from inside the vehicle. At

least three or four men were all shouting at once:

"All systems at full, all systems at full! Stand by for emergency takeoff!"

"Get the greenies back in here! Reverse their power! *Get* them in!"

"No, leave them! This station's going out of action. The demolition trucks will be along—"

"I'm in command. I said get them *in!*"

All this Solo heard with half an ear. The chatter and smack of bullets into the earth kept him wiggling and squirming from side to side. He assumed Illya was dodging along right behind him.

A slug tugged at his left leg. Solo raced into the cover of the saucer craft itself. His blackened cheeks were bathed in the pink-gold radiance which seemed to be a property of the metal hide of the strange vehicle.

The stairs came down again. Solo ran along until he was far enough beneath the ship to be out of the line of fire. The guns stuttered to silence as Illya crawled up beside him.

The agents lay directly underneath the immense vehicle. A few yards to Solo's right, the last of the little green men was stumping jerkily up the stairway. The stairs began to telescope shut a second time.

Clenching his teeth, Solo rolled to the right. He stretched out his free hand and clawed. His fingers caught the leg of the green creature. He jerked. The earth rumbled and shook. The night was filled with a noise that made Solo's temples beat with pain.

The green figure, oddly metal-hard against his glove, writhed back and forth, as though trying to tear itself from his grasp. The figure was trying to answer the command to return inside the saucer.

The roaring increased. Deafened, Solo hung onto the little green thing as it began to spout smoke from its leg and arm joints. The roar was coming from overhead, from within the saucer craft.

"It's taking off!" Illya cried.

Solo twisted over, goggled again.

Without showing a single sign of a belching rocket-tube, the saucer craft rose straight up into the air. It rose so swiftly that it was no more than penny-sized in thirty seconds. All the supporting legs retracted simultaneously.

Solo followed the saucer with blurred, dazed eyes. All at once the craft seemed to halt its ascent, hesitate in the sky and then change direction. It shot off horizontally, out toward the Atlantic Ocean.

Soon it was no more than a gleaming, flashing mote. Then it vanished in the faintly graying east.

"Did you see that speed?" Solo breathed. Illya limped over. *"Nothing* moves that fast."

"Nothing except the very latest weapon of THRUSH," Illya replied.

"The fastest aircraft in the world." Illya's gloved hand flopped out to point. "What is that thing?"

Solo lifted the little green figure he held in his right hand. Its feelers drooped. Its green-glass eyes had ceased to glow in the ugly, squat face. From the carefully molded articulated hunk of metal rose curls of smoke and a rubbery electrical reek.

Solo took one of the creature's metal arms and broke it at the elbow joint. Strands of shorted-out wire and bits of metal fell out of the opening.

"A mechanical doll," he said. "In the name of sanity, why would THRUSH use—"

"Dolls. Dolls of death!" Illya interrupted with a sudden snap of his fingers. "It's so clever, yet so completely logical. That cab driver fellow saw these things. What did he assume? Exactly what he was supposed to assume."

"He thought they were monsters from space, the pilots of the UFO. When actually the real pilots were—"

"Our clever friends from THRUSH. Napoleon, I will wager that all those people who have seen extra-terrestrials in connection with saucer stories in the past have seen nothing more than mechanical dolls like this.

"How easy for THRUSH to manufacture creatures of any shape and size, in case any of its inevitable ground tests were accidentally

glimpsed by outsiders. What a perfect way to conduct a testing program and obscure its real nature!"

For a long moment there was silence. A night bird cried forlornly in the distance. Both U.N.C.L.E. agents lifted their heads, stared into the pale sky stretching star-spattered to the east. In Napoleon Solo's brain a tiny pinpoint image of the escaping saucer-craft burned bright.

In the past the U.N.C.L.E. organization had faced the threat of awesome new techniques and devices of warfare spawned by THRSUH

But Solo couldn't remember a single one of them which represented a threat of the magnitude posed by the disc-shaped air vehicle with its incredible speed.

What if THRUSH mounted an entire armada of the craft? They could outdistance and outmaneuver even the swiftest of the world's supersonic air forces. And that might be enough to tip the balance at last in favor of the fanatic supranation. That might be enough to bring the hour all of U.N.C.L.E. dreaded—the hour in which THRUSH, finally confident of its omnipotence, struck at the whole world.

Illya Kuryakin wiped his face with his sleeve. The fabric came away soot-stained. "I would think, Napoleon, that before we report back to Mr. Waverly, we should investigate further." Grimly Illya pointed straight down at the earth.

Nodding, Solo dropped to his knees. He dug with his fingers, uprooting living grass and weeds planted in perfectly authentic soil. At a depth of six inches, however, his fingers encountered the steel of the mobile doors built into the earth's surface.

"This must be a sort of underground hangar," he said. "I wonder how many there are around the world."

"More important," Illya said, "how do we get into this one? Just before they took off, the Thrushmen in the ship shouted something to the effect that this station was being abandoned."

"I wish we knew why." Solo stood up. "And I wish we knew what had happened to Sabrina and the hackie. This could all tie in with Mr. Waverly's information about THRUSH's peculiar inactivity around the world. Maybe the troops are being pulled back—the saucers too—for a briefing before the big strike. But where are they being pulled to?"

Solo's eyes stood out ghastly-hollow in his soot-smeared face. "And how much time have we got?"

"Not enough for our immediate problem. The saucer crew said something about demolition trucks coming. Very likely there's no life underground."

"Let's find out," Solo said.

For the next twenty minutes, Solo and Illya dug down to the concealed doors in several locations. The steel was solid. Then Illya gave a low yell:

"Here's the seam where the doors meet."

Solo rushed to kneel beside him. Illya scooped out a bowl-shaped hole in the earth. He took a small rodlike flash unit from a concealed pocket, let it shine down into the hole. Sure enough, the meeting point of the two doors was clearly evident. But the agents couldn't even get a finger-hold between the panels.

Frustrated, Napoleon Solo

stood up. He peeled off his gloves and rubbed a bruised knuckle.

"There's got to be an entrance somewhere," he growled. "If we don't find it—"

Illya Kuryakin clutched his arm. "Napoleon. Listen."

Through the misty gray air of pre-dawn a low rumbling reached their ears. It drifted over the hill separating them from the country road.

"Trucks," Solo whispered. "At least three of them."

He whipped his head around. Because it was near dawn, a few details of their surroundings stood out in gray-etched starkness. Across the little valley on a line with the clump of shrubs where they'd hidden most of the night, a stand of scrawny beech trees swayed in the morning wind.

"Let's go up there," Solo said. "We can get out of sight and let our THRUSH friends show us the doors to the underground."

Turning, he bolted in the direction of the trees. Illya was right behind.

They made it with only a heartbeat's time to spare. Illya dropped down beside Solo behind the trees at the top of a rise as white light washed out over the little valley from the far side. Engines suddenly roared.

Three unmarked vehicles, gray-painted, ground to a halt at the top of the hill. They had heavy, broad-tread tires to make it possible for them to turn off the country road and cross the field.

The six headlights blinked out. Four men hopped out of each truck. They unloaded equipment—wire, detonators, sticks of explosives. One of the Thrushmen carried a flame-thrower over his shoulder. The dozen-man demolitions team moved down the hillside at a brisk, efficient pace, spreading out.

Solo hardly breathed. The ghostly figures of the men stood out against the paling sky. The leader of the squad passed the mid-point of the valley floor. He crouched, lifted up a clump of weeds whose roots seemed to be planted in some sort of stainless steel cup. He reached down, twisted his arm as though turning a switch.

To his right a trap door sprang back. Golden-pink light flooded up from below. The squad leader motioned. The first of his men climbed down through the trap onto what appeared to be a metal ladder. The other demolitions men followed in turn.

"It appears," said Illya, "that getting inside is just a matter of knowing where to find the proverbial needle in the hayfield."

"Stack."

Solo felt better now, his nerves keying up for the action to come. He took a firm grip on the butt of his long-muzzled pistol. Then he adjusted the calibrations on the cylindrical baffle at the tip of the muzzle.

"Tranquilizing darts ought to do the job," he said.

Illya Kuryakin adjusted his weapon to fire the same charge.

Solo said: "Shall we take a look downstairs before the boys wreck everything?"

"Excellent thought."

Illya and Solo stood up. Solo gave a quick nod. They broke from the cover of the beeches, plunging at a dead run down the hillside just as the last of the demolitions men clambered down the ladder into the underground.

In swift, long strides the U.N.C.L.E. agents pounded toward the trap door. But luck was against them.

Running in the half-light, Illya failed to see a gnarled, exposed root. His toe caught it. Flailing his arms, he spilled forward onto his chest. The impact knocked a loud, involuntary exclamation out of him.

Solo pulled up short. Illya jumped up again. The echo of his accidental shout rang in the silence. Solo remained frozen, waiting to see whether anyone had heard.

A shadow flickered in the trap door opening. Solo and Illya hit the dirt as a head popped up, peered around.

There were not enough concealing weeds to hide the agents from the man looking straight across level ground. The THRUSH man saw them.

"Up here!" the man bawled down to his companions. "*Spies!*"

Clinging to the iron ladder, the man whipped his gun hand up. His automatic pistol began to stutter. Streaks of fire chewed the gray morning. Solo and Illya rolled to the right and left as bullets ripped the earth between them.

Coming up on his stomach after the frantic roll, Solo fired twice. The man on the ladder slapped his cheek. His automatic pistol fell down into the opening. From below, someone cursed, evidently banged on the head by the falling weapon.

The Thrushman on the ladder slumped forward, digging his drugged fingers into the ground. He couldn't hold onto the crumbling earth. He disappeared, falling.

More shouting and cursing from below. Suddenly another Thrushman appeared on the ladder, pointing the circular end of a metal cone at the U.N.C.L.E. agents.

Solo lurched to his feet, letting out a yell of warning: "*Flame thrower—!*"

With a thunderous whoosh, fire gouted from the metal cone, a licking, sizzling tongue of fire that almost reached Solo. He felt the intense heat as he dodged wildly aside.

"*Behind us!*"

That was Illya Kuryakin. His voice counterpointed the roar and crackle of the fire from the flame thrower. Its operator had clambered up out of the trap door, was

advancing now behind the fiery gush of burning napalm. As though he were using a garden hose, the Thrushman moved the fire from left to right and back again, trying to catch Solo in the swathe.

The little valley was lit up like some infernal stage-setting, crawling with the glare of firelight. Solo responded to Illya's cry, spun around. Another trap door had sprung open in the hillside behind them.

A THRUSH man had come up that way, unlimbered a machine-gun, was balancing the tripod on the earth. The machine-gunner had Solo in his sights.

Solo fired a tranquilizing dart, missed. Behind him he felt the ferocious heat from the advancing spurt of the flame thrower. The machine-gun belched. Solo lunged to the right, realized he was running directly into the lashing tongue of fire, hurled himself back the other way.

Meantime Illya had flattened on the ground again. With two rapid shots he nicked the gunner's neck with a dart. The operator pitched backwards through the trap door. The gun stuttered into silence.

Napoleon Solo ran like a trapped animal, first to the right, then to the left. The hellish tongue of flame followed, crackling and crisping the earth behind him.

Solo's lungs began to hurt. He slipped. The squirt of fire kissed the heel of his left boot. His whole leg felt scorched as he leaped away from the wash of fire.

Stumbling backwards, he stamped his heel on the earth again and again to put out the flames that were blackening the leather boot. He lost his balance. He pitched over, slammed down hard with the wind knocked out of him.

Gasping, Solo struggled up on his elbows. Not three feet in front of him, a third trap door opened with a spang. Another THRUSH agent poked his head up.

The man spied Solo's sweaty, sooty face directly ahead, grinned savagely as he pulled himself up off the ladder.

"Got one of them," the man yelled. "Hold the fire back! *I said pull the flame thrower back!* We want to see who they are—"

Solo heard an intense crackling and roaring. The weed-grown earth all around was lit up with scarlet brilliance. The flame thrower's spurt of hot death had almost reached him. Now it receded suddenly. The Thrushman leaped forward, stamped down hard on Solo's wrist as he struggled to bring his pistol into firing position.

Hobnails dug into his wrist. Solo jammed the muzzle of his pistol against the calf of the THRUSH agent. The agent was fast on his feet. He leaped aside. This released the pressure on Solo's wrist the instant he fired. The tranquilizing dart missed. Before he could fire another, he was blasted in the

side of the head by a murderous kick.

The blow lifted Solo half off the ground, knocked him over on his back. His eyes blurred. *Come on!* he thought, trying to lash himself into action. *Just because it's six to one is no reason to fold up.*

The Thrushman moved in again, rather cautiously now. Solo fought back dizziness, brought his shaking gun-hand up, pointed the long muzzle into the Thrushman's face.

The back of Solo's skull blew up with pain.

Brilliant lights danced behind his eyes like fireworks. He rolled over onto his belly, dropped the pistol, and seized the left leg of the Thrushman who'd come up from behind to smash him across the head with the butt of his gun.

But Solo's fingers seemed to be made of gelatin dessert. He couldn't hold on. The Thrushman's harsh laughter grated as he shook off Solo's grip the way someone would shoo away an irritating but harmless puppy. Then the second Thrushman booted Solo again, this time in the rib-cage. Groaning, Napoleon Solo flopped out on his back.

Visible as nightmarishly elongated figures, the two Thrushmen met and faced one another across Solo's sprawled body. Against a crackle of burning weeds and a reek of scorched earth, Solo heard the first one say:

"Look at that outfit. He's dressed for night work. This isn't some hayseed out goggling at the funny lights in his pasture."

"What do we do with him?"

"Take him. They'll want to interrogate him. Where's the other one?"

"I don't know. I thought they had him cornered up by those beech trees. Yes, look. They're going into the trees after him."

"All right. Situation under control. Send the rest of the men back to setting the charges. It's almost dawn. I'll take this one to the truck."

Struggling, Solo fought against the big, hard hands of the Thrushman who lifted him, dumped him across his shoulder and began to trot up the hillside.

Solo thought he was fighting, battering at the man who carried him. Then he realized that his hands were only twitching feebly. All the strength had been kicked out of him.

He needed to stay awake. Needed to fight, get away, in case Illya Kuryakin didn't make it.

Where *was* Illya?

As if in answer, gunshots crackled from the beech trees.

His mind was darkening. Like a meal sack, he was carried past one of the trucks by the big Thrushman. The sense of failure was like gall in Solo's mouth. He had a last, wildly distorted view of the little valley. Thrushmen were disappearing down the trap doors again,

vanishing into the wash of golden-pink light from below ground. Patches of weed and turf sparked and smouldered in the aftermath of the flame thrower. Gunfire crackled again.

The Thrushman levered open a rear door of the truck. He dumped Solo inside. Solo's head hit metal flooring, hard. He lay for long minutes, just on the edge of unconsciousness. Like dull thunder came a muffled explosion.

Another.

Another.

A whole series of them.

The last thought that drifted into his mind was, *They've wiped out the installation.*

No chance now to learn whether it held any clues to the awful Armageddon THRUSH might be plotting with its incredible saucer aircraft—

Strange saucer-shaped lights danced in his mind. Then the blackness came down completely.

THREE

SLOWLY, SWIMMINGLY, Napoleon Solo returned to consciousness. He thought he'd gone mad.

Either that, or he had been transported to some other planet and was even now confronting one of its senior citizens. A space monster was staring at him.

A part of his mind instantly told him the notion was absurd. On the other hand, the way things

had been going, who could tell?

Exactly where he might be, Solo had no way of knowing. Chilly darkness tinged with an elusively familiar scent surrounded him. He was propped awkwardly against a cold concrete wall.

The monster watched him with strange, sparkling red eyes.

Solo reached out with both hands, discovered that he was sitting on a cold floor. A bit of broken flooring material brushed against his fingertips. It felt like conventional floor tile.

Aching from ankles to ears, he shook his head. Some of the haze cleared from his eyes. The scarlet thing surveying him took on sharper, more hideous detail.

Off in the dark, the scarlet thing watched him. Its misshapen, scaly red face was only vaguely human. It nodded slowly. The scarlet eyes pulsed brighter, then dimmer. It had no nose, only a slit for a mouth. The longer Napoleon Solo looked at it, the more artificial it seemed.

Just to be sure he hadn't slipped a mental cog, he said, "Hey. Take me to your leader."

Mechanically the alien-shaped head continued to nod up and down, up and down, up and down.

Solo recalled the little green man that smoked and came apart in a tangle of articulated metal and burned insulation. He stood up. His joints were stiff. The cold of the place didn't help any. Nor did the nauseating aroma filling the darkness, which he finally identified as the reek of paint.

He started forward in the darkness toward the shining scarlet head. He collided with what his hands told him was a metal work bench. Moving left, he went perhaps ten or twelve feet before he came to the end of the bench. His fingers told him he was feeling the housings, knobs and control levers of small machine tools. A workshop? Nepoleon needed some light.

Light from somewhere was falling across the scarlet face of the glass-eyed monster. This light, Solo discerned, was leaking in from behind metal venetian blinds. It highlighted the head of the mechanical doll sitting on a window sill, causing it to shine disembodied in the otherwise total darkness.

Solo rounded the end of the work bench and reached the window. He picked up the two-foot-high doll. It buzzed faintly and continued to nod its head. Solo put the doll down, found the pull cord of the venetian blinds, gave it a yank. Up shot the blinds on a scene which finally reassured him that he hadn't been transported off the earth.

He was on the fourth floor of a building, looking out over a rain-swept street lit by mercury lights. Skyscrapers gleamed on the horizon. The building on the opposite side of the street was old red brick, five stories high. On its roof was a dilapidated metal signboard. The sign read *COSMO TOYS, INC.— Finest Toys in the Cosmos.* A smaller, bottom line was incomplete. The name of the town had peeled away, but *ew Jersey* was still visible.

He was a prisoner somewhere across the river from Manhattan.

Solo made a quick search and discovered without great surprise that his THRUSH captors had thoroughly gone over the hidden pockets of his black night-warfare clothes and removed everything, including his communicator and the suicide capsule which all U.N.C.L.E. agents carried. He still wore his crepe-soled shoes though. So he had one weapon left. He'd conserve it, wait and use it when it would count most.

Now to tackle the problem of escape. He tried the first, most obvious way. He unlatched the window lock, reached for the rusty handle to lift the window upward.

The moment his fingers touched the metal handle, an electrical charge hurled him against the work bench. The back of his head struck

the edge. He went down in a daze as tin-shaded lights spaced along the ceiling flashed on. Alarm bells began to ring, deafeningly loud.

Solo climbed to his feet again. The bells pealed, hurting his eardrums. A door in the wall opposite the window flew open. Three uniformed THRUSH guards with snub-nosed anti-personnel rifles crowded inside.

The guard in front snapped over his shoulder, "Fetch him. He wanted to be informed the moment this one woke up. And turn off those bells before we all go deaf."

Solo blinked in the light. The workshop looked disused. Most of the metal benches and machine tools were covered with dust. Along one entire wall, shelves held neatly stacked metal boxes. The ends of the boxes were inscribed with legends like, *Part #268A—Model RM "Red Martian." Large elbow gear.*

The guards, typical THRUSH uglies, ranged themselves on either side of the door. Solo leaned on the work bench and said: "Well, well. I thought everybody who worked in toyland wore an elf suit."

"Very funny, Mr. Solo," said a guard.

"You know who I am?"

"Of course. We ran your prints through the THRUSH Central computer. You're quite a catch. I have already asked the man in charge for the privilege of finishing you off." The guard grinned.

"Just who is the man in charge?" Solo asked.

From the door a husky voice rasped, "I am, Mr. Solo. Perhaps you have heard of me. My name is Dohm."

For a moment Solo couldn't believe what he'd heard. The name struck his ears like a thunderclap. *Dohm.* Even the highest echelons of U.N.C.L.E. had never been entirely convinced that a man with that name existed on THRUSH's research staff.

Solo had first heard about Dohm years ago, in a discussion with an U.N.C.L.E. agent in Bucharest. Within its ranks THRUSH had many malevolent research specialists. These men dedicated their immense learning to the evil cause of world domination. But the accomplishments of all the researchers together, so the story went, were as nothing compared to the brain-power, the total intellectual superiority of the one madman-genius who ranked highest of all on the THRUSH scientific roster.

Dohm.

No photograph of Dohm had ever been taken. Only scattered bits of biographical information on him could be located in the memory banks of U.N.C.L.E.'S computers, and most of that was considered unreliable.

Dohm. THRUSH agents had taunted U.N.C.L.E. with his name. He had been pictured as a mental giant, as the greatest of all THRUSH

menaces to the free world. Even Mr. Waverly had never been quite certain that Dohm existed, except as a psychological bogey-man.

"Yes, I am Dohm," said the man, walking in the door. "How are you, Mr. Solo? I apologize for leaving you locked in this dismal place. But we have quite a few preparations to complete. My time is valuable. Now that you are awake, I am pleased to make your acquaintance. Your name is known to me. You have been a formidable foe of THRUSH."

All Solo could do for a moment was stand speechless. His host was incredible, a man only a few inches above five feet, dressed in a simple white coverall. Dohm's fingers, hands, arms, legs and neck were normally proportioned. But from his scrawny neck sprouted an immense oval head almost twice normal size.

Dohm's cheeks shone yellow-sallow. He had a flat nose, a tiny prune mouth, big, distended brown eyes. The top of his oval skull was the largest part of his head. It was bald except for a fringe of white hair around the oversized ears.

From the white hair and the lines deeply etched into Dohm's face, Napoleon Solo judged the man to be approaching fifty. He was grotesque. The tight-stretched skin on top of his swollen head showed the blood vessels beneath. One such vessel actually stood out, pressing up from underneath the skin and pulsing with a monotonous regularity.

"And we've heard about you," Solo said. "We never really knew you existed."

Dohm bobbed his immense head. "Quite right, quite right. I have been in the background, shall we say, for over twenty years. In fact since the very inception of THRUSH. I have been in charge of the research project which has enjoyed our number one priority all those years. Due to the complex nature of the program, I have been forced to labor in obscurity. But it won't be long now, Mr. Solo, until all the world knows Dohm and his work."

And the little man covered his prune mouth, and tittered.

There was no humor in the bulging brown eyes. Those eyes focused on Napoleon Solo with an amusement that was all the more horrible because of its inherent cruelty.

Dohm contained his laughter, went on: "Like your charming female associate before you, you have blundered into the heart of this operation just as it is about to bear fruit, and so—"

Solo interrupted: "You've got Sabrina Slayton here?"

"Mercy, no!" Dohm replied. "Not here, Mr. Solo. She and that insensate lump of pork, that dreadful illiterate taxi person, are now—ah, but we mustn't disclose too much. We must tease you a little longer. We must let the fear and

anxiety work and work on your imagination—"

Dohm demonstrated what he meant by twisting his yellow fingers together into a complex knot which he suddenly broke apart.

"—until your mind reels and boggles at my success! I am the one who has had to defend the largest THRUSH research budget. It is I who have had to plead for its continuance year after year. But at last, SLAV is a reality."

Eyebrow lifting, Solo repeated, "Slav?"

"All capital letters. The THRUSH Strategic and Logistics Aerial Vehicle. I named it as a tribute to my European origins."

"I thought maybe you came out of a test-tube somewhere."

"You crude ruffian!" Dohm shrieked, lifting himself to tiptoes and drawing his hand back. At the last moment he contained his anger, didn't strike. "Ah, but I must realize that your cheap witticisms are the outpourings of desperation. You have seen SLAV in operation, haven't you? You realize that its tremendous speed and mobility will give us an advantage which U.N.C.L.E. cannot overcome.

"Slav is the flying saucer."

Dohm wiped his nose, sniggered. "Yes, that's the name some idiot reporter in the penny press conceived years ago when someone sighted one of our early flight-test models. I must admit that we did take advantage of the term. We equipped and operated this establishment, a quite legal and profitable toy manufacturing concern, for the purpose of manufacturing our little red, green, and purple herrings."

Dohm strolled to the sill. He picked up the mechanical space creature. "Actually they come in thirteen different sizes and colors. Several deluded persons have actually reported conversations with them, though of course they have no speech mechanisms. It's been rather galling to see these saucer addicts publish books on the subject, I don't mind telling you. They've profited from our technology. But we still get a chuckle whenever some sub-normal individual reports a conversation with a Venusian."

"Then most of the saucer sightings over the years have been sightings of your test models?"

"All the sightings, Mr. Solo. Every last one. Our computers confirm it." With a wistful little shrug, Dohm let the red metal doll fall. It crashed and shattered on the tiles. "Now the years of camouflage are at an end. SLAV has received green light clearance to proceed to its final phase. We no longer need the Cosmo toy works nor its products.

"As a matter of fact, when you were brought in from the Westchester hangar site, which has now been destroyed, we were preparing to remove all our records from here

and depart. Every SLAV test site and hangar facility world-wide is being closed down, save for our central headquarters." Dohm's brown eyes shone with a moist film as he added, "The overture is concluded, Mr. Solo. The play itself begins."

Napoleon Solo wouldn't have believed a word this egg-headed little madman said if he hadn't seen the saucer craft for himself. In the next hours and days, U.N.C.L.E. might very well face its most awesome challenge.

Solo didn't know whether Illya Kuryakin was alive or dead. Sabrina and the hackie Jackie might be alive, but they would be of little help. Solo realized coldly that stopping THRUSH, if they could be stopped now at all, was entirely up to him.

Cautiously he asked, "What are you going to do with me, Dohm?"

"Rest assured we are not going to leave you here. As soon as we depart, this site will be burned to the ground. I believe we shall take you along and—"

A flurry of activity in the hallway. A burly technologist in a white coverall like Dohm's stuck his head in.

"The last of the crates is aboard, sir."

Dohm spun around on one tiny heel to face the door. "All of the microfilm too?"

"Yes, sir. Miss Brocade is powered up and ready for flight."

"Dismiss the guards who will be leaving the area by conventional routes. Alert the gate men to check the departing guards. All uniforms and weapons must be left behind in the employee gymnasium across the street. That will be burned first."

Dohm seized Solo's arm with small fingers that were surprisingly strong. "You come with me, Mr. Solo. I want you to see first hand why my name will be enshrined in all the textbooks one day. The Wright brothers? Pfui! When we control the capitals of the world—and it won't be long!—official histories will name Dohm as the greatest aerodynamical genius in history. Poor U.N.C.L.E. I do feel rather sorry for your team of lackwits. There is nothing in the world that can stop me, or SLAV, or THRUSH."

Dohm turned smartly and exited into the corridor, the taps on the heels of his elevator shoes clicking in brisk rhythm.

The pair of guards moved in on either side of Solo. They hustled him down the hall past empty offices and into a rickety elevator. Dohm held the door. The cage rose slowly.

They stepped out into the rainy darkness of the roof. Directly ahead, legs supporting it, hatchway open and staircase telescoped down to ground level, was the huge, golden-pink saucer craft.

A thick-meshed camouflage netting was propped up on poles above

it. The net shielded the saucer from overhead observation.

"Please hurry along, Solo," Dohm said at the stairs.

Solo thought briefly about turning on them, attacking. It would be a relatively worthless gesture at this point. He'd do better to conserve his strength, keep his wits alert. He'd try to move effectively if and when he reached the central headquarters Dohm had mentioned.

Solo climbed the stairs. They were made of smoothly turned aluminum. He ducked his head at the hatch and stepped into a round, dome-ceilinged control chamber whose circular wall was completely covered with display panels, sequencing lights and TV screens.

Two black-leather bucket seats were bolted to the floor in front of a main control board.

From one of these seats, a girl looked around. Her sensuous face quickly changed from cold, professional alertness to lazy delight.

"Is this the legendary Napoleon Solo?" she said. "He does cut a dashing figure."

"Keep your mind on the takeoff," Dohm snapped.

Two of the guards had come aboard. They shoved Solo toward three other seat-buckets behind the main control area. Solo sank down in one. A guard pointed to the shoulder-type safety belts. Solo buckled both belts across his chest without protest.

The guards seated themselves on either side, buckling themselves in. Dohm made a final survey of the chamber.

Solo noticed the girl watching him again. He could see her face in an angled mirror above the control board. She was quite pretty, in a hot-eyed, full-lipped way. She wore a single softly glowing pearl in her pierced left earlobe.

And the glimpse Solo had gotten of her splendid figure tightly sheathed in a white plastic flight suit was intriguing. In other circumstances her presence would have raised his romantic temperature several degrees.

Dohm noticed Solo's interest, said rather snappishly:

"I neglected to introduce my assistant, Miss Brocade. This is Mr. Napoleon Solo."

"Charmed," Solo grinned. Dohm scowled.

"Mr. Solo is reputed to be quite the ladies' man," Brocade said. Her voice was like honey. Again she threw him a challenging glance via the mirror. One of the guards seated beside Napoleon Solo gave a crude snicker.

Brocade's eyes glittered angrily in the mirror. The guard went white.

"Your loyalty is to me and to THRUSH !" Dohm exclaimed to the girl as he buckled himself into his control chair. "Remember, Brocade, you are property. Pretty and intelligent, yes—but property nonetheless."

"Dohm dear," she bit back, "you never allow me to forget that."

"We are wasting time," the scientist said. The top of his misshapen skull projected above the back of his chair. In the interplay of flickering lights along the circular walls, the frantically pulsing blood vessel just under his skin stood out like a squirming snake. "Begin the sequence."

Dohm threw levers, flipped switches. Three oversized TV monitors in front of the control chairs lit up. One showed the toy factory roof. Another displayed an infra-red night panorama of the surrounding industrial area. The third was a gridded radar display with a large silvery dollop of light in the center.

Brocade gave Napoleon Solo a last glance in the mirror and began working switches and levers in tandem with Dohm. On the left-hand TV screen Solo saw the camouflage net above them peel back. A strange, whining roar filled the control room as the hatchway slid shut.

"If you don't mind me asking," Solo said, "where are we going?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" Dohm replied. "To our central headquarters. The top-secret factory where we are just completing assembly of twenty-three SLAVs similar to this."

"You only have two dozen?" Solo sounded surprised.

"Do you think we will need more to move our forces anywhere in the world and execute our master attack plan? Mr. Solo, this SLAV flies at a speed of fourteen-thousand miles per hour. Can anything in the world stand against that, especially when the other twenty-three craft will be equipped with nuclear-powered cannon which this model does not carry? I doubt it. Still, you may judge for yourself. You will see our little armada. That's why I have brought you along. To show it to you before I kill you."

Brocade murmured: "Kill him? What a pity."

Dohm tittered. "Yes. For him. And wait till he finds out how I plan to do it. No more chatter now. Give me full power!"

"Full power," Brocade called, throwing levers. With a roar and a thrust that left Napoleon Solo dizzy, the flying saucer rose straight up into the dark, rain-drenched sky.

What chance did he have? Solo wondered.

Worse, what chance did the world have?

ACT THREE

PERILS IN PARADISE

LESS THAN one hour after the saucer craft lifted from the roof of the toy works, Illya Kuryakin was within three miles of the same factory.

Illya was driving along one of

the six-laned New Jersey superhighways. Against the night horizon flaring with city lights Illya suddenly noticed a spreading scarlet smudge.

A huge green sign over the superhighway indicated that his exit was next. Riding both the accelerator and the brake of the little gray fastback car taken from the U.N.C.L.E. car pool, Illya swung onto the down ramp.

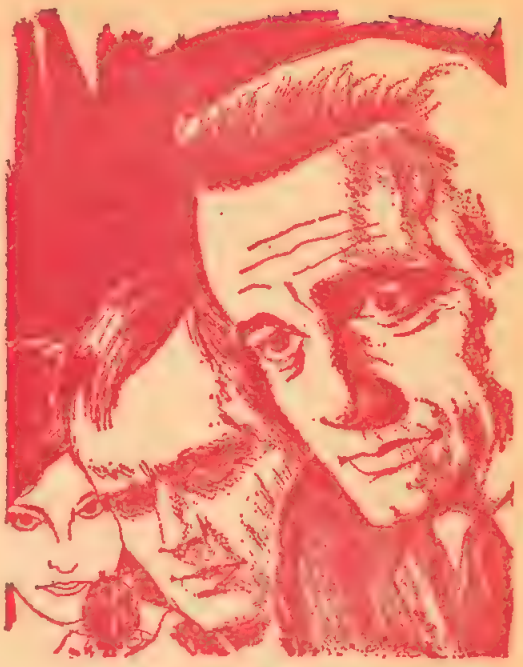
He glanced quickly at the street map lying on the leather cushion beside him. The site of the Cosmo factory was X-marked in red grease pencil.

With alarm Illya realized that the flame-smudge staining the sky just west of the superhighway was in the approximate location of the toy works. His hands tightened on the steering wheel.

Illya had no way of knowing for certain that his destination was going up in flames. Yet his knowledge of the way THRUSH worked told him this might be the case. He took the corner at the bottom of the exit ramp on two howling tires. He barrelled through an intersection on a yellow light and shot down a dismal street of warehouses.

The shadow of the fast little car leaped out ahead. Several blocks away, flames engulfed both sides of the street.

Illya Kuryakin hadn't slept for—it seemed like days. Anxiety gnawed him. Where was Napoleon? In the hands of the enemy at the site of



the holocaust ahead? Or had he already been flown off somewhere in the saucer? Either way, the Cosmo works remained U.N.C.L.E.'s only tangible clue to the current operations of the supranation.

And if the factory were being burned, just as the Westchester hangar site had been destroyed, Mr. Waverly's worst fears were being realized. It would indicate that THRUSH was scorching the earth to clear the way for a massive offensive.

Driving at eighty-five miles an hour down the deserted street, Illya was nag-ridden with guilt because of his delay in getting here. Actually, U.N.C.L.E. had moved at top speed considering the problem, and solved it in rather remarkable time.

The preceding dawn, Illya Kuryakin had dashed into cover among the beech trees on the hill overlooking the Westchester site. Down below in the little valley, Solo was lost somewhere behind the belching stream of fire put out by the flamethrower. Illya pelted on over the hill, firing back across his shoulder as other Thrushmen came after him.

He ran until he found a brush-tangled gully. Oh his stomach he crawled beneath the covering of the underbrush for what seemed a quarter of a mile or more. Several times his pursuers were quite close, crashing up to within a foot or two of where he lay. Each time he held his breath until his lungs ached. Finally the pursuers turned back.

Illya clambered up, made a wide looping circuit back through a field in order to come up to the valley from a new direction. Crouched low, he moved through the morning grayness. He'd almost reached the hillside when a thunderous explosion sent flames and dirt toward the sky.

Stunned by the sound, Illya stood up. Other explosions followed. He realized that the demolitions men had already set their charges. The underground hangar site was being destroyed in blast after booming blast.

Illya Kuryakin wondered agonizingly whether Solo was alive or dead. Just then, truck engines roared. Illya whipped his head to the right. Limned against the increasing light on the crest of a hill, the trio of demolitions trucks were preparing to leave.

All of Illya's professional coolness left him. Practically berserk with rage and frustration, he charged up the hill, firing round after round at the trucks. Thrushmen returned his fire, though sporadically. Clearly the demo teams were anxious to get away now that daylight had arrived.

The little valley boiled with smoke. A dozen fires crackled. Vision was difficult. For a moment Illya lost the trucks as they went down the hillside in reverse. They backed around and headed out toward the road.

Lungs hurting, Illya ran harder. The first truck rolled toward the road, accelerating on its heavy tires through the weeds. The second truck followed. Illya caught up with the third, leaped, managed to get a double hand-hold on the handles of the rear doors.

But his foot missed the bumper by inches.

His hands tore at the truck metal as it pulled away from him. He landed flat on his face, stunned, as the vehicle rumbled off.

Illya Kuryakin sat up, swearing. He glanced down disgustedly at his gloved hands. Suddenly his pale eyes went down to slits.

He lifted his left glove, studying the tip of his index finger.

A small flake of gray paint

measuring no more than an eighth of an inch across adhered to the fabric.

Illya had the presence of mind to tuck the flake carefully into a zippered breast pocket of his black night-warfare suit. Then he trudged back to search the ruined rubble of the hangar site.

He couldn't get very far into the valley because the rocks were smoking hot. Had Solo been blown up along with the station?—He mustn't think about that.

Illya sat down a safe distance from the smoking ruins and called headquarters on Channel D of his pocket communicator. Within forty minutes, several fast U.N.C.L.E. limousines arrived.

One brought Mr. Waverly. Illya Kuryakin spent an hour showing his chief through the ruins and directing the search for possible clues.

At the end of that time, the U.N.C.L.E. teams confirmed what Waverly and Illya had already seen with their own eyes. The job of destruction had been thorough.

Mr. Waverly was the first to use the ominous words: "Clearly a scorched earth policy. They must be drawing back, getting ready for something big."

Illya remembered suddenly. "The paint!"

"What paint, Mr. Kuryakin."

"This, sir."

Carefully Illya took out the tiny gray flake. He explained how he'd gotten it. Mr. Waverly's usually phlegmatic face showed sudden animation.

"For heaven's sake, Mr. Kuryakin, don't wave it about and lose it! Put it back in your pocket! We'll take it back to the laboratory immediately. If we can use it to identify the make and model of the vehicle, and then co-ordinate with the proper registration authorities, we may have a lead to Mr. Solo's whereabouts."

Illya zippered the paint flake back into his pocket. "Yes, sir. Provided he is alive."

"Don't think otherwise, Mr. Kuryakin. To do so is to court all sorts of mental turmoil. You should know that by now." Waverly searched the pleasant blue of the morning skies. "And if U.N.C.L.E. has ever needed all its wits, I fear the time is now."

TWO

A DISMAL RAIN began at noon. The laboratory seemed to take hours to complete its work. Finally the pigment was identified.

But the motor vehicle authorities, though Waverly goaded them by phone incessantly, required several more hours for a proper identification. A list of nine possible owners of the same type of vehicle was finally drawn up at 3:30 in the afternoon.

Teams of agents were dispatched. By mid-evening, the only lead

which had not been checked out was Cosmo Toys, Inc., across the river in Jersey.

Illya Kuryakin had remained at headquarters to receive all the reports. But since Cosmo was the last possible suspect—the firm owned a fleet of six similar trucks—Illya told Waverly he wanted to make the check himself.

Mr. Waverly looked fatigued. "I understand, Mr. Kuryakin. I'll have a car sent round in front of Del Florio's right away."

Strapping on his shoulder holster, Illya said, "The fastest one in the garage, if you please, sir."

"Naturally, Mr. Kuryakin." He understood, and shared, the concern for Napoleon Solo.

In minutes Illya was racing toward New Jersey.

Droplets of rain splattered against the windshield as the little fastback howled down the warehouse street. Illya cut the distance to four blocks, then three. Ahead, buildings on both sides of the street were burning fiercely.

He crossed an intersection a block from the holocaust. He applied his right foot gingerly to the brake. Who had set fire to the facilities? THRUSH? If so, had the arsonists already departed by another route?

Suddenly headlights glared in a truck delivery bay on the ground floor of the burning building on his left.

A huge stake-sided truck swung out, gathering speed as it roared toward him.

Chunks of rubble were falling into the street now. The upper stories of both buildings had been fired first, and part of an antiquated signboard which announced the firm's name came tumbling down onto the sidewalk. The letters *OSMO* trailed fire and sparks.

As the truck careened down the street, Illya instinctively cut the wheel of his fastback over toward the right curb. The truck had a canvas top rigged over support struts which arched from one of the staked sides of the bed to the other. The canvas had come untied in several places.

It flapped and revealed nightmarish figures grouped in the back of this truck.

The dozen men in the truck wore gray asbestos suits with face plates of dark glass.

The truck had nearly reached him. Without even putting the thought into words, Illya understood that this was the THRUSH arson brigade departing. Strident factory fire alarms rang. Illya spun the wheel over, zooming the fastback straight at the cab of the truck. At the last second he wrenched himself out from under the steering wheel.

Into the clamor of bells blasted a rip and crunch of metal. Illya's world spun. Big truck tires howled. His head struck the fastback's ceiling as the little car started to

telescope. Illya levered the right-hand door open and rolled out.

Jumping up Kuryakin dragged his long-muzzled pistol from under his coat. The fastback had crashed into the left front fender of the truck, jamming the wheel and bringing the truck to an abrupt stop. The men in asbestos suits shouted in confusion. One of their number seemed to be the leader.

"Get away on foot, you imbeciles. Someone use the flame sticks you've got left and kill that meddler, whoever he is."

Illya went for cover behind the wreckage of the fastback's rear deck. He lifted his gun hand up and over, fired twice. Two of the men in asbestos suits, hit, reeled backwards like bizarre stuffed animals.

The leader was taller than the others. He cursed foully as he dragged something loose from a wide black belt at his waist. The left hand window of the truck cab rolled down. Sweating face lit by the fireglare of the burning buildings, a Thrushman leaned out with a rapid-fire pistol.

Illya swung round on his knees, shot once. The man in the cab shrieked and pitched forward. He hung down over the cab's side.

The leader of the fire crew lobbed whatever it was he'd taken from his belt. It arched up and over the wrecked fastback and landed within three feet of Illya.

White-yellow liquid fire spewed out like a fountain. A dollop of it touched Illya's coat, set it to blazing. Frantically he tore the garment off and flung it away. His shirt began to burn.

The asbestos-clad Thrushmen tumbled from the truck, running in all directions. Another section of a Cosmo building came crashing down. Two of the Thrushmen died beneath it, crushed.

The incendiary device thrown by the THRUSH leader shot out tendrils of liquid fire along the pavement. Illya went stumbling backward in the street.

He was a clear target. He had to get away from that crawling, expanding pool of fire It swallowed the asphalt, turned it to bubbling tar as it ate its way into an ever-widening circle of flame.

One of the running Thrushmen clubbed clumsily at Illya's head with his fist. Illya jumped aside just as another of the firesticks came tumbling end over end in front of him.

He threw himself to the right like a diver, slamming down on the sidewalk as the device spurted out its fountain of liquid fire. His left trouser leg started to burn.

He kicked his leg against the brick wall of the building, heedless of the pain. At last the fire went out.

He dodged bricks tumbling down from overhead. Fire and police sirens were shrieking somewhere. Illya searched the street for the tall figure of the arson leader.

Nearly all of the Thrushmen had melted away. Only one remained near the truck. It was the leader.

Illya Kuryakin extended his right arm full length. The muzzle of his pistol glared in the firelight. More bricks and mortar crashed down along the sidewalk as the leader, a bizarre figure in the asbestos suit and reflecting face-panel, whipped his arm all the way back to throw.

"Stand where you are," Illya shouted. "Stand there or I'll kill you."

The leader hesitated, arm raised high to throw the last fire device. Illya advanced toward him through the rubble-littered street. A police car rounded a corner a block away, slewing wildly. It braked fast as it pulled up to the wreckage in the street.

Illya took another step forward. Another. The leader of the arsonists remained immobile, arm upraised. The fire-stick was a black wand in his right hand, as he watched Illya walk slowly.

Sweat streamed on Illya's face. Bricks rained down just behind him. One hit his shoulder hard. He walked on, eyes never swerving from the asbestos-clad figure.

When Illya Kuryakin was within ten feet of the Thrushman, the man said:

"Why did you stop us? Who are you?"

"I'm from U.N.C.L.E.," Illya Kuryakin said. "Now please put that thing down before—"

From behind the dark glass faceplate came a wild, fanatical scream. And Illya Kuryakin knew in a split second that he had taken a risk and lost—lost to the fantacism of THRUSH.

The leader of the arsonists did not intend to be captured alive by U.N.C.L.E. He whipped his hand down, twisted the top of the wand-like thing and then charged forward, arms wide.

Illya hesitated. He did not want to shoot the man in cold blood. The fanatic leaped, caught Illya Kuryakin in a maniacal suicide hug.

Writhing, kicking, Illya tried to break the man's hold. In a moment the incendiary device would go off. They'd both be engulfed in the yellow-white fire.

Ugly panting sounds came from behind the faceplate as Illya wrestled with the asbestos-clad man. The man had his hands locked behind Illya's back. Illya stamped on the man's foot, slammed his palm against the faceplate, battered it. Seconds now, surely only seconds left—

In their struggling they had careened toward the sidewalk. A massive chunk of falling cornice smashed Illya's temple a glancing blow, then struck the Thrushman's faceplate. The impact separated the two antagonists. The Thrushman dropped the fire-stock.

White-yellow fire bloomed,

blinding Illya with a brightness that brought physical pain. Moving by instinct, he grabbed the Thrushman's arms and spun him. The asbestos suit became a shield between Illya and the fountain-burst of fire that ate up asphalt, brick and fallen concrete.

The Thrushman felt the heat, shrieked. Illya jerked him backwards. They fell, and Illya rolled away.

The Thrushman writhed back and forth in agony. Illya crawled toward him. Fire engines were clogging both ends of the street now.

Policemen appeared, running, along with stretcher-bearers from an ambulance.

Illya pried up the man's faceplate, saying a wordless prayer.

Eyes glared out, hateful, fanatic. The Thrushman was alive. He struggled feebly.

Illya kept the arson leader pinned down by sitting on his chest. The pool of yellow-white fire from the last stick was creeping steadily toward them again. The Thrushman ground his teeth and swore. Illya lifted himself, sat down again hard on the man's chest.

"There, my friend. That'll stop your histrionics. I know you're dreadfully sorry to be alive. Your suicide won't be enshrined on the THRUSH honor roll after all. But we want you for an ornamental bird, don't you see? We want you in a cage where there are some devices highly conducive to making little thrushes sing."

Almost laughing with relief, Illya Kuryakin cried, "Stretcher! over here!"

The bearers ran up. Illya identified himself. One of the bearers said, "We'd better get out of here.

That wall's about to come down."

"Fine." Illya had recovered some of his aplomb. He brushed plaster dust out of his hair. "Which way to your ambulance, gentlemen? We are all going on a fast ride into Manhattan. Oh shut up," he added to the Thrushman in the asbestos suit.

The man was still grinding his teeth as he was carried away.

THREE

HIGH-INTENSITY surgical lights flooded the center of the chamber. At the edge of the light, whitish figures moved. A control console glowed off in the gloom, its dials quivering every time the patient on the surgical table breathed.

The man on the floodlit table was covered with a sheet. The sheet was not quite long enough to accommodate his big frame. His bare feet stuck out grotesquely. Clear tubes full of fluid were connected to the man's arms. Other wires ended in metal wafers clamped to his temples, wrists, sternum, and inner elbows, The wires ran off into the dark toward the control console.

Alexander Waverly stepped into the light, tick-ticking the stem of his cold pipe against his front teeth. To someone in the dark he said, "Can't you speed it up a bit, doctor?"

One of the white-coated men appeared, checked a pinch clamp on one of the clear tubes. The physician unfastened the clamp so that the flow of the liquid was unimpeded. Inside the tube, the colorless fluid ran faster down toward the captured Thrushman's left arm.

"I've doubled the rate of administration," the doctor said. "We can't risk more."

For a long moment no one stirred in the room. Then the man on the table groaned.

The man rolled his head to one side. He had a horsy, ugly face. His cheeks contorted. He bared his teeth as though he knew, even under drugs, that he was in the enemy camp and must resist.

Mr. Waverly frowned, waved his pipe.

"Try him again, Mr. Kuryakin."

Illya moved forward in the circle of light. He looked paler than usual. A soot-smudge still stained his cheek.

The ambulance had brought him back to Manhattan headquarters less than two hours ago. It was beginning to feel like two years. The THRUSH leader on the table obviously had a whole battery of built-in psychic blocks, carefully implanted by his superiors. Under a normal dosage of the drug running in the tubes, he had struggled against the straps binding him. Though totally unconscious and therefore theoretically receptive to the drug, he had not spoken a syllable.

Bending near the man's ear, Illya said, "What is your name? You will answer me. Your name."

Tense silence. The man rolled his head from side to side again. He clenched his teeth, sweating.

"Are you sure he is completely unconscious, doctor?" Illya asked in an aside.

"He's at the fourth level at least," came the reply. "They've blocked him well."

Illya Kuryakin leaned near the ear. "Give us your name."

The man's lips twitched. He made a guttural sound. Suddenly he slammed his head from side to side, crying out in agony.

Illya waited.

At last the man's chest stopped heaving. A waxy tranquility settled over his face. The man gave a

long sigh. The words were whispered.

"William—Constantine."

"Your assignment, please, Constantine." Illya mopped his face. *"Your assignment."*

"Greater—Philadelphia."

Out of the darkness the doctor spoke, sounding relieved: "The blocks are down."

Illya asked several routine questions to make certain. Everything checked out. The man's answers seemed coherent and correct.

Finally Illya asked: "Was the toy factory a THRUSH station?"

"Y—yes."

"Was an U.N.C.L.E. agent brought there today as a prisoner?"

"Yes."

"What was his name?"

"I—can't remember."

"Was his name Napoleon Solo?"

"I think so."

"What happened to him? Did you kill him before you burned the factory?"

"No."

"Where is he?"

"He was taken."

"Taken where?"

"To headquarters, aboard—the SLAV."

"What is the SLAV?"

"Strategic logistics and attack vehicle."

To Mr. Waverly Illya whispered, "That could be their name for the saucer." To the man on the table: "Does the SLAV fly very fast?"

"Yes. Very fast."

"And it looks like what people think of as a flying saucer?"

The sweating mask of a face hardly stirred now. "That's right."

"Where was this aircraft going? Where is it headquartered?"

Again the man's mouth wrenched. He arched his back and shrieked once from the depths of his unconsciousness. Mr. Waverly advanced a step, harsh-eyed with concern.

The Thrushman named Constantine fell back on the table, panting. His eyes were still closed. Illya clenched his fist.

If this agent had not been high enough in the echelons of THRUSH to be privy to the information, they had no hope.

Illya Kuryakin repeated the question: "You will tell me, Constantine. Where is the aircraft headquartered?"

Like a rattle of death the words came out: "Island. Pacific. Lobba-Lobba. *Lobba-Lobba.*"

Mr. Alexander Waverly snapped his fingers. Someone ran for maps.

Minutes later, Mr. Waverly rolled up the map of Polynesia which he and Illya had been examining. In a low, strained voice he said: "Bon voyage, Mr. Kuryakin."

FOUR

GET OFF my boat, you bloody rotten mucker! I'll have no drunken beachcombers stowing away with me!"

And with considerable thespic fervor, Captain Rollo Whitewoole, master of the rusty old island freighter *Melbourne Maid,* delivered a kick to Illya Kuryakin's backside.

Howling like an inebriate just awakened from a rough night, Illya sailed over the side. He plummeted straight down, the tails of his dirty white jacket flapping. His beat-up straw hat flew away a second before he hit the blue-green water.

He wondered whether the drowsy, crescent-shaped harbor of Lobba-Lobba harbored any famished sharks.

Fortunately the water was tropically warm, and not deep. Illya Kuryakin kicked and splashed to the surface. He shook his fist at the cargo ship. Captain Whitewoole's red beard shone in the Polynesian morning. He bellowed basso profundo curses as members of his crew fetched up a couple of garbage cans from the galley and emptied the contents overside. Lemon peels pattered down on Illya's soggy hair as he paddled toward the rickety quay.

An assortment of Occidental loungers, most of them looking like unkempt beach bums, had drifted down to the pier when the *Melbourne Maid* stood in from the channel. An outrigger full of fat Polynesians with black hair and brown cheeks sailed past Illya, putting out toward a distant green island shimmering in the sun haze. Illya's feet crunched gravel.

He floundered up out of the water, seized a ramshackle ladder and dragged himself up onto the pier. He wrung water out of his coat tails. Then he turned back toward the harbor, where the old rust-sided freighter with Australian colors bobbed on the morning swell.

"Bunch of dirty, heartless sods, that's what you are!" Illya shook his fist again. "Just because a fellow's a bit down on his luck and wants to see his sweetheart in Pango-Pango—"

"Threw you off, did they, matey?" rumbled a voice behind him.

Illya turned round. He hoped he looked suitably unpresentable. His cheeks were dirty. His white suit was yellowed and much stained. His nylon shirt hung damply and his floral tie was covered with grease spots.

The specimen confronting him was a burly, bloodthirsty-looking man in a filthy striped jersey, black sailor's trousers and crumpled peaked cap. A vicious scar traced its way from the man's right cheek across the bridge of his nose to the inner corner of his left eye. This damage tended to make him squint somewhat hideously.

With his swag belly and powerful arms, he was a formidable specimen, looking Illya up and down as the latter replied: "That's right, matey. I was down in the hold with

the coconuts. If there hadn't of been so many of 'em, I'd of had my knife out. I'd of opened that high-and-mighty captain's throat, you can bet."

The man chuckled. "Old Ten Commandments Whitewoole. He don't put in here often. We ain't the moral tone to suit him. You can call me Sailor."

But the man didn't offer to shake. In his glittering eyes Illya detected if not suspicion, at least a trained wariness.

Illya Kuryakin ran a finger around his damp collar.

"Basil Jones," he replied.

"Basil *Jones?*" Sailor scowled, then grinned. "Sure, matey. One of the Jones boys. We seem to get a lot of 'em down here, we do. How come you stowed away with his nibs?"

"Couldn't be choosy," Illya answered. "Had to take the first boat out of port. I was in a hurry."

Sailor scratched his weathered chin. "On the dodge, huh? The forces of law and order panting after you and all that? Yes, I'd say you look the type."

Squinting into the hot butter-colored sunlight, Illya lowered his voice. "Look, *matey*. I don't see that my business is your affair. I don't think I have to answer any of your questions at all. That is, unless you're the chief of police or something."

Sailor held up both hands, palms outward. "Easy, now. Our chief of

police here is an old native. He sits around in his lava-lava drinking grog all day. You've got no call to be sore."

Illya put a waspish, ugly note into his voice: "Nobody bothers Basil Jones with questions." He dropped his left hand into his sodden coat pocket. "Not unless they want to go a few rounds with the six inches of Birmingham steel I keep handy."

Reflectively the burly beachcomber scratched his chin. "Bit of a tough nut, are you?"

"Basil Jones can handle his own."

During the next few seconds Illya's nerves wound up tight. Sailor continued to scrutinize him. A few other loungers, including three

overweight Polynesians with wide grins, watched the little scene because there was nothing else to do.

The island's only port village was named the same as the island itself.

The village of Lobba-Lobba was a ragtag collection of thatch huts and rotting pine-board shanties built along a muddy street at the water's edge. A parrot yammered somewhere. Behind the scrap of a town, luxuriant green jungle rose away inland, tier on palm-fronted tier. At the very summit, perhaps five miles away, a slate-blue mountain peak rose up, emitting a single white curlicue of smoke.

Altogether it was the most impossible place Illya had ever seen. It looked as though a cheap B-grade film director had called for a small Polynesian port, down at the heels, where desperate men congregated. A designer had then trotted out every human and architectural cliche, including the natives grinning in their lava-lavas, to fill the bill.

At length Sailor snorted. He nodded once, laughed.

"All right, Jones, if that's your name. Guess we can stand one more guest in our charming little island community. At least for a night or two, till you see what your plans are. There's a packet Saturday for Pango-Pango. You might be able to flim flam the captain into giving you passage. He's nuts about a stupid game called Chinese checkers. Odd, him bein' a Jap. But if you offered to play him, he might carry you for nothing. Otherwise—"

"I'll sweat in the stokehold if I have to. This little baby on Pango-Pango—"

Illya Kuryakin leered. He drew a girl's silhouette in the air.

This finally seemed to convince Sailor that Illya was all right.

"Come on, we'll go up the road to the Episcopalian Hotel." He indicated the dilapidated two-storey building. "We had a minister out here once. He went native and jumped into the volcano up there, one time when it was kicking up a storm. All because of a cute little native minx. Shame, ain't it? There's so many little broads in the world. Anyhow, they named the hotel after him kind of as a joke. We don't go in much for church stuff on Lobba-Lobba," Sailor finished with a rather macabre scowl.

Illya still had the feeling that he was being monumentally put on. "Will it cost much to get a room at the Episcopalian?" he inquired.

"That depends whether you got any money, matey."

"A couple of quid. None for Captain Blood-sucker back there, though. I'd have died before I let the sanctimonious old toad take it."

Again Sailor clapped Illya on the shoulder, nearly knocking him on his face. "That's the spirit, Jones! You haven't got much flesh

on those pipestems you call arms and legs. But I can tell you've got a lot of what it takes. That's the kind we like on Lobba-Lobba. Come on. I'll buy the first gin."

They walked up the street. Here and there luscious Polynesian girls wearing sarongs and brilliant flowers in their hair walked along barefoot. One, carrying some kind of breadfruit in a basket balanced on her lustrous hair, gave Illya a steamy glance of invitation. He winked.

Sailor went, "Eh-heh-*heh!*" and nudged him in the ribs.

In other circumstances Illya would have been quite interested in the fetching wench. At the moment, however, his attention was perfunctory. He faced front again.

In the bar of the Episcopalian Hotel, a motorized palm-leaf fan revolved on the ceiling with agonizing slowness. It barely stirred the humid air. Sailor introduced Illya to as scrofulous-looking band of international cutthroats as he had ever encountered. There were three Poles, a German, a Greek, two Arabs, a Senegalese, two Chinese, an American and several less distinguishable types.

They all had eyes that were cold, unfriendly, mercilessly professional. Their belts and holsters bristled with pistols, knives, short clubs, razors, and even one set of brass knuckles.

Illya downed one glass of tepid gin and answered a few questions from the assorted cutthroats. He took pains to act surly and go for his knife once or twice. They seemed impressed. Then he pleaded fatigue. The one-eyed native who presided over the bar handed him a room key and pointed toward a sagging staircase.

Illya Kuryakin ascended to a gloomy second floor corridor. Be hind one door, a girl giggled. A large, brilliantly-patterned snake was crawling down the center of the hall. Illya flattened against the wall until it passed on, hissing. Number 6 was the room assigned to him.

Inside, Illya fastened the flimsy night-chain in place, peeled off his coat, tie, shirt and undershirt. He slopped water from a cracked washstand bowl onto his face. Various unappetizing insects swam lazily in the bowl. Illya dried with a dirty towel and tried to ignore them.

He flopped down on the squealing bed. The heat was stifling. A gorgeous cobalt butterfly flew in through a hole in the window screen. Illya got up, peered cautiously out the window. The Episcopalian Hotel abutted the jungle, a thick tangle of green growth where brilliant flowers bloomed among the palm tree trunks. Illya thought he detected a faint trail angling off through the jungle. He marked it visually by means of two palms, then lay back down on the bed to sleep.

Although he was exhausted, ten-

sion so gripped him that he couldn't close an eye.

The trip into the Pacific had all the aspects of a constantly-changing nightmare. Mr. Waverly had arranged for the U.N.C.L.E. jet to carry him west, with refueling stops in San Francisco and Hawaii. While Illya was airborne, Mr. Waverly had contacted the *Melbourne Maid* to lay out the plan.

The jet put down at an airstrip carved out of the coral of a nameless atoll. Illya was airlifted by helicopter out over the gleaming green ocean of Polynesia. The *Maid* appeared on the horizon. Illya went aboard. The *Maid* steamed all night toward Lobba-Lobba, just so Illya and Captain Whitewoole and his crew could stage their elaborate little charade —the drama of a seamy stowaway being discovered and tossed off.

Illya intended to waste no time now that he was here. Somewhere up in the jungles was the THRUSH research facility where the saucer-craft was headquartered. There Illya must search for Napoleon Solo. And for Sabrina Slayton and the cabbie, Jackie-what-was-his-name.

Illya Kuryakin held out little hope for any of them.

Consequently his principal task was to destroy the THRUSH installation, and gain a second-best revenge in the process.

The hours until nightfall seemed endless. Occasional singing and other sportive sounds drifted up from the bar. But no one disturbed him. Finally a thick tropical darkness fell. The night was soon lit by a fat quarter moon that threw glamorous Technicolor highlights on the dark foliage below Illya's window.

It was all a little too good to be true, he thought as he sliced through the screen, dropped over the sill and quietly lowered himself to the damp, fragrant earth.

A gramophone ground out *Lili Marlene* from inside the building. Illya oriented himself with the pair of trees he had seen earlier, took one cautious sniff of the humid night wind and started off.

Distantly surf lapped the harbor. High above the treetops, a faint glow colored the sky scarlet. The volcano? How active was it?

Illya dismissed the question as his feet hit the dirt trail. He started through the foliage, careful to make as little noise as possible. He didn't know exactly where he was going. But if he could reach high ground and have an unobstructed view, he should be able to locate the THRUSH headquarters swiftly. He could then—

Illya blundered into the cruel-sharp strands of barbed wire strung across the trail at one-foot intervals up to a height of six feet.

He drew back. His sleeve ripped loose. The fence ran right and left into the semi-darkness of the jungle where birds chattered and unspeakable things slithered. The

fence wasn't electrified, else he'd have been crisped by now. He sucked in a breath.

The fence proved that Lobba-Lobba was a stage-setting after all. He'd reached a carefully-marked perimeter past which the curious were urged not to stray. The barbed wire assured him that he'd come to the right island.

Carefully taped to his legs Illya Kuryakin carried a collection of small pieces of equipment which made walking uncomfortable. Now he was glad he had them. He pulled the two parts of his long-muzzled pistol from their waterproof carriers, fitted the parts into a lethal whole, tossed the carriers aside and thrust the pistol into his belt. He ripped an additional tape free, flexed the handles of the all-purpose tool, and carefully cut the top strand of barbed wire.

It flew apart with a *spaaang*. He cut the other strands, finally snipping the last one. From directly ahead, three huge searchlights flashed on, blinding him. Illya hurled himself forward across the cut wire—

And Kuryakin very nearly fell into a square pit in the center of the trail.

From the pit's bottom, rose all sorts of serpentine hissings and rattlings. Illya hung over the pit's edge, digging in his toes to pull himself backwards. Bathed in the whiteness of the lights and sweating hard, he managed to pull back far enough to gain his balance and stand up.

Lobba-Lobba was nothing but an immense booby-trap!

Holding this grim thought uppermost, he twisted the muzzle of his pistol until the silencer baffled was in position. He took aim. He fired into the center of the trio of spotlights illuminating the trail.

He'd begun to expect the worst. It happened. All the lights went out when the lens of the light he'd hit exploded, all three lights went out. The moment darkness descended, a huge amplified siren began to hoot, *oooWAH, oooWAH,* loud enough to wake half the South Pacific.

Moments later Illya was plunging up the trail into the jungle with the inhabitants of the village baying at his heels.

Portable torches flashed among the palm trees behind him. Illya Kuryakin left the trail. Staying off it, he might be able to avoid further booby traps.

But the going was difficult. Creepers lashed his face. Thorny shrubs dug his hands and legs. Insects bedeviled his skin.

Yelling ferociously, their electric torches glimmering, the THRUSHES he'd flushed crashed up the jungle slopes in pursuit. During an interval between the *oooWAH* wails of the siren, Illya heard the man called Sailor cry, "I told headquarters he was a ringer!"

Panting, Illya raced higher on

the jungle slopes, trying to outrun his pursuers. But they knew the island of Lobba-Lobba better than he.

He was afraid it was a losing proposition.

FIVE

SHORTLY BEFORE sunset on the same evening, an inspection party completed a tour of the incredible THRUSH installation located roughly two miles above the village of Lobba-Lobba.

The party consisted of Dohm, his svelte assistant Brocade, Sabrina Slayton, the cabbie Jackie Woznusky, and Napoleon Solo. Solo had been re-united with his friends only hours earlier, upon arriving at the island in the saucer.

The party emerged from a steel doorway onto a railed concrete balcony. The balcony overlooked a huge paved quadrangle, very obviously the heart of the THRUSH complex.

The building they had just toured, with Dohm showing off the communications and computer equipment, was the administration building. Across the way a much larger, windowless concrete structure housed the two dozen saucer craft, neatly hangared in rows. Other, smaller gray buildings surrounded the quadrangle. There was a barracks for the saucer flight crews. One crew in pale blue coveralls was jog-trotting across the quad now. They *hup-hupped* as they went.

The entire facility was built on a cement plateau which had been constructed first on the mountainside years ago. Above and below, the jungle closed in, dark, noisy, earth-smelling in the twilight.

Far down to the right Solo saw a few thatched roofs. The village. The cobalt sea ran out to the horizon, shimmering with sunset highlights. High up to the left, the slaggy cone of the island's great volcano emitted a thin curl of smoke.

"Well, my dear friends," said Dohm, "I believe that completes our little inspection. I wanted you to see it. Especially you two from U.N.C.L.E."

Dohm's distended brown eyes were laughingly cruel. He had taken great delight in informing Solo and Sabrina about every technological marvel on the station. He'd pointed out how each would play its part when the two-dozen SLAVs over there in the great hangar rose up in the sky to flash from city to

city and bring devastating hit-and-run destruction.

Now Dohm spread his tiny hands and smiled his tormentor's smile. "You have seen a station which cost literally billions to build, and more billions to operate. In the hangar over there rest my two dozen beauties, including the one which brought us here. Frankly, I do not believe that it will take more than forty-eight hours of concentrated attack upon the various world capitals before there is total capitulation by them. Then we will rule and—"

Dohm's mouth soured. He reached over to pinch Sabrina's elbow.

"Come come, Miss Slayton! Show a little more enthusiasm! Don't you find it all frightfully interesting?"

Sabrina's wide violet eyes were horror-struck. "No, just—frightful."

Brocade laughed. She leaned back against the balcony rail and stretched. She wore a tight-fitting black uniform which accented her superb figure. She made a sharp contrast with Sabrina, who looked weary and bedraggled. How many centuries ago in Manhattan had Sabrina's scarlet dress been fresh and festive?

Brocade's glance lingered on Napoleon Solo. In fact she'd been giving him fetching looks all during the tour. He kicked his fatigued mind awake, made a mental note that Brocade's obvious interest might be useful.

"What's the point of showing us all this, Dohm?" Solo asked. He felt gritty. His black night-warfare suit had a hole in the left knee.

Dohm's eggish eyes caught the reflections of the sunset sky, shone with fanatic intensity. "To convince you, Mr. Solo, that THRUSH now has the capability to crush U.N.C.L.E. and the world."

Solo feigned dejection. "So I'm convinced."

And he nearly was.

Dohm had also conducted them through the thunderous, smoking factory-rooms carved out of the concrete beneath the quadrangle. Here hordes of workers were already assembling components and setting up the manufacturing lines for the next complement of twenty-four saucer-craft. These would be back-up vehicles, in case the first flight failed to bring about total global surrender.

Solo was grimly afraid two dozen would be plenty.

Jackie Woznusky had stumbled along during the entire tour like a bemused, astounded child. His 250-plus frame heaved now as he breathed hard. He wiped steam from his black-rimmed glasses and whispered:

"I'm convinced, too. Whatever you guys are up to scares me to death. Boy, would my relatives think I was nuts for chasin' saucers if they could see me."

He put his glasses back on, his eyes going blink-blink-blink faster than they had before. Solo felt sorry for the hackie. The man didn't really comprehend all that was happening.

Jackie watched Napoleon Solo like a hopeful lap dog. Did Jackie think Solo could get them out? On that score Solo felt pretty hopeless.

Sabrina couldn't control a catch in her voice as she asked, "What—happens to us now?"

"You been talking about killing people," Jackie said. "Is this when we get it?"

Dohm licked his lips. His swollen bald pate glittered with the light of evening.

"I haven't quite worked that out. Perhaps it would be advisable to do it immediately, though."

Brocade touched his arm. "Dohm, dear. Give them until morning, at least. You know how much more receptive a person is to a slow, excruciating death when they've had all night to lie awake worrying and tossing and agonizing."

Solo was contemptuous. "You're a bunch of monstrous vermin."

"Tut-tut, Mr. Solo," Dohm tittered. "Do I detect the aroma of sour grapes."

Elaborately Solo shrugged. He flashed a quick glance at Brocade. She was leaning back against the rail again, displaying her figure. She could only be doing it for his benefit.

The judgment wasn't egotism but rather a cold, professional assessment. Perhaps Brocade was in the mood for a little frolic. Perhaps she had suggested delay for that reason. Solo couldn't read her eyes or her expression. Brocade simply continued to smile lazily and preen herself.

Dohm clicked his tongue against his teeth. "Very well, Brocade. I think you have the right idea. Besides, I believe I am slated to spend the evening going over the attack plan with our flight leaders in the briefing room."

Sabrina asked. "When will this attack be launched?"

"Soon, my dear girl. Oh yes, very soon. *Guards!*"

Dohm clapped his hands for soldiers. They came double-timing up the concrete stairs from the quad. The big, round sighting lenses of their snooper rifles caught the sunlight, made them shine like weird eyes.

"Return our guests to the prison building," Dohm instructed the squad's commander. "See that they receive food. A complete meal, but nothing too heavy. We don't want them drifting off to sleep tonight. Then ring the bells every half hour to assure that they remain awake."

Dohm turned to Solo as the soldiers prodded Sabrina and Jackie down the stairs.

"In case you did not have time to examine the guardhouse during our tour, Mr. Solo, I must tell you that

it is quite secure. The concrete walls are three feet thick. We have needed prison facilities because this is a remote location. Occasionally a lonely, homesick worker runs amok. But never before have guests so distinguished graced the cells.

"Sleep well. We shall meet again in the morning. I think I'll order a full review of the troops, plus an assembly of the workers right here in the quadrangle. We'll make a little spectacle of your execution, eh?"

And, giggling again, Dohm watched as Napoleon Solo was herded down the stairs after his friends.

Solo stumbled, fell. He scraped his knees on the cement. A soldier kicked him in the ribs. Sabrina rushed back to help him up.

The soldiers closed in.

Sabrina turned on them. "You filthy *animals!* Is that all you know? Torture? Brutality? *Killing?"*

Solo stumbled to his feet, caught her shoulders, shook her. His face was grim.

"Easy, Sabrina." He shook her roughly until she got control of herself.

Sabrina leaned her head on his shoulder, crying. Jackie Woznusky wrung his hands. The THRUSH soldiers laughed and shoved them forward. Sabrina let Solo support her as they walked.

At one point Sabrina raised her head. Her violet eyes were dark with fear. She framed words with her lips:

"We'll never get out."

"There's a way." Solo murmured it, smoothing her hair. "There must be."

He didn't know of any, though.

Soon they were back in the squat concrete guardhouse at one edge of the quadrangle. The jungle began on the building's far side. A parrot chattered, its cry cut off as the steel door clanged behind them.

Fluorescent lights cast a lifeless aura over the cement-walled hallway. There were four windowless doors along each side. Jackie Woznusky was manhandled through one of these. Sabrina was placed in another cell. Solo was kicked into a third. The door closed with a ring of metal.

Solo found himself in a cheerless six-by-six cubicle. A ventilator high up circulated a whisper of disinfectant-tanged air. The room's furnishings consisted of a stone slab built out from the wall and covered with a cheap blanket. Solo sat down to think.

Instantly a maddeningly loud alarm bell rang. It continued ringing for at least five minutes, until Solo's head was nearly bursting with pain. Finally it stopped. He heard the ringing in his ears for quite a while.

Solo massaged the bridge of his nose. That bell would certainly demoralize them all if it kept up all night. Nerves beginning to grow

raw with desperation, Solo paced round and round the cell.

The walls were seamless. He could not reach the ventilator grille even by jumping. He dug his nails into his palms in frustration.

The guard brought dinner, which he didn't touch.

Time passed. Solo guessed several hours or more.

He was sitting on the stone bed staring at the crepe soles of his night warfare shoes and thinking furiously about the right time to use his last small, precious advantage.

The door-bolt rattled. He glanced up warily.

Inching the door open with her shoulder, Brocade smiled at him in a lazy way.

"Hello, dear."

Wild hope flickered. Napoleon Solo jumped up. "Brocade! An unexpected pleasure."

"Oh, come off it, sweet," she laughed as she insinuated herself into the cell. "And stop peering over my shoulder like an owl. There's no guard behind me. Of course they're nearby. One peep out of me will bring them on the double."

Brocade remained leaning against the door frame, ticking her brightly-painted nails against the thigh of her tight-fitting black costume. Its long sleeves and high neck made it even more provocative.

Solo managed to slip a nonchalant smile onto his face as he sauntered forward.

"You haven't told me the reason for your visit. A little more psychological warfare?"

"Of course not," she pouted. "You're not that addled, are you? I was trying to flash you little signals all during the tour. It's very simple. I'm Dohm's property as well as his assistant. It's very tiresome. I've heard so much about the famous Napoleon Solo—his dash, his style. And lately, I've practically been a prisoner myself on this miserable, steamy little island. So much work—"

Brocade's dark glance flickered. "Of course I'm loyal to THRUSH. Don't mistake that." Her lips relaxed again, moist and curling into a cat's smile. "But a girl does get bored, Mr. Solo."

The softly glowing pearl she wore in her pierced left ear flashed back the light as she inclined her head.

"If you'll promise to be on your good behavior, we can go for a little stroll outside. You'd be very foolish to try to get away. There's nowhere you could go without being tracked down."

Brocade studied her nails, then cast one more smoldering look in his direction.

"Well, Mr. Solo? It will be dawn very soon. Do you want to stay here and fritter your last hours away? Or would you rather take a walk with me?"

Solo grinned. "If I go along, can you fix it up so they don't kill me?"

"Let's talk about it, shall we?" She crooked a finger.

The girl fairly exuded an air of femininity, Solo thought as he walked forward and took her arm. And if her romantic desires were getting the better of her, stranded out here in the tropics as she was, who was he to fail to take advantage of it?

Brocade linked her arm with his. They moved down the corridor. A granite-faced guard on duty at the hall's end pressed a button on a control panel.

A green light flashed. The steel door sprang open. Warm night air bathed over Solo as they stepped outside.

They were at the rear of the prison building. "This way," Brocade said. "That trail leads to a pleasantly secluded clearing where we can talk."

As they moved onto the trail, Solo noticed a lurid pink light in the sky. He identified its source. The crator of the volcano on the mountain top was alight and smoking. He thought he felt the earth rumble faintly beneath his feet.

To Brocade he said, "If I'm not exactly the soul of wit, not to mention a latter-day Casanova, I trust you'll forgive me. Your boss doesn't do much to make a guest feel at home."

Brocade laughed. "Dohm is a genius. And there is so much of him wrapped up in SLAV and this island. Whole decades of his life! He has staked his entire career on this one project. But he does tend to be a vile little beast at times."

"Frankly, Brocade, I can't understand what a nice girl like you is doing in a place like this at all."

The trail widened suddenly, bringing them into a dim, moon-whitened clearing. A silvery-winged bird went cawing up through the trees. Solo stopped. He took Brocade's shoulders, looked into her eyes. What he saw there sent his hopes soaring crazily.

Her eyes were actually swimming with tears of joy! The girl was actually starved for something resembling human affection! Well, it just pointed up the crushing inhumanity of THRUSH.

Solo kept his voice low-pitched as he said, "No, I just can't understand it, Brocade. A beautiful girl like you—you could have anything in the world, you know."

"Mr. Solo," she breathed, her eyelids fluttering shut. "I'd settle for one kiss."

In the murmurous stillness of the rain-forest Napoleon Solo bent toward her, gathering her into his arms.

"Miss Brocade, this is my pleasure," he cooed.

And punched her in the jaw.

The girl uttered a little sigh and folded to the earth. In other circumstances Solo would have felt like the world's prize heel. But the

stakes were too high for scruples.

He bent down to check her breathing. Normal. She might remain unconscious for ten minutes. Not a great deal of time, but enough.

Checking the sinking moon to make sure of his directions, Solo re-traced his way to the path. He moved along it back toward the prison building as rapidly as he dared. His crepe soles barely made a sound. And he remembered that he might have a couple of aces left in those soles.

In moments he reached the jungle's edge. He peered out at the back side of the blockhouse.

A thin line of light leaked out around the steel door. It hadn't been shut after he and Brocade left. Solo was about to start forward when he noticed a darker lump of shadow to one side of the door.

Gradually he made out the shape of a guard leaning against the exterior wall, snooper rifle in the crook of his arm.

Thankful he'd spotted the guard in time, Solo went into a crouch. He launched himself forward at full speed.

The guard uttered a strangled cry of surprise. He raised the snooper rifle to fire. The blade-edge of Solo's right hand caught him on the neck. The man let out a soft cry and dropped.

Solo snatched up the rifle. He checked to make sure the safety was off. Then he kicked the steel door aside and jumped into the corridor, swivelling around to jam the rifle's muzzle against the stomach of the startled Thrushman inside.

"All right, you," Solo growled. He jerked his head at the control panel. "Release the two prisoners. If you punch the wrong button and an alarm goes off, you won't remember anything else."

The guard saw Solo meant it. He pressed two buttons. A pair of doors, the right ones, clanged back. Solo gut-punched the guard. As the man doubled, he chopped him on the back of the neck with the rifle butt.

Solo whirled and raced up the corridor. Sabrina was stumbling in the light from one of the open doors. Out of the other came Jackie Woznusky, his eyes wide behind his thick spectacles.

From the center of the corridor Solo gestured them near him.

"Now listen. I don't know where we go from here, exactly. But we've had a lucky break, so let's ride the streak while it lasts."

The streak had already evaporated. The concrete floor hummed and dropped from under them.

Jackie burbled in terror. Sabrina screamed. They plunged through space and struck warm water. Gasping, floundering, Solo struggled to the surface.

Lights glared. He regained his footing. The water was only up to their chins. Another cement panel

rolled aside, this time above the water line. Solo goggled.

In a lighted booth behind double-thick safety glass, Brocade smirked down at them, hands on her hips. Her chin was bruised. Her nose was smudged with dirt. Hate was in her eyes as her amplified voice dinned at them:

"As I suspected, Mr. Solo, you weren't sincere. I had to test you, of course." Her face turned ugly. "You ninny! Did you think I would amuse myself without taking ample precautions?"

"Well, I had hopes—" Solo began.

"The hopes of a desperate man who has lost his senses," Brocade said.

"It's beginning to look like that, isn't it?"

Solo wasn't as chipper as he sounded. Sabrina clung to him in terror. Jackie Woznusky sloshed in the water like a terrified mastodon.

"How did you get back here so fast?" Solo asked. "I really decked you."

"You *thought* you rendered me unconscious, Mr. Solo. We women of THRUSH aren't dainty tea-party types, you know. We have stamina. And there is a special little tunnel which runs underground from the clearing back to here. I have often used it.

"You have disappointed me dreadfully, Mr. Solo. Consequently, you find yourself in a special tank we have used on occasion to deal

with members of the work force who tried to leave Lobba-Lobba before their contracts expired. Dohm will be furious with me—" Brocade was reaching for a stainless steel rod extending from the wall of the booth "—but I think I can convince him that disciplinary action was necessary."

And with a sweet, vile grin, she pulled the lever.

An entire wall of the water-filled chamber rose up, changing the level drastically. The water swirled away into the darkness of another room beyond. Then, like a tidal-wave, it swept back again.

Jackie Woznusky saw the thing first. He began to make bleating noises.

Sabrina screamed low. She clutched Napoleon Solo's arm.

Brocade laughed. The amplified sound jarred against the thrashing in the water. Solo went rigid with horror as he stared at the monster that had been washed toward them by the tide of water from the dark room beyond.

"Get behind me!" Solo shoved Sabrina hard.

Not for a single second did he take his eyes off the writhing tentacles and the awful, bag-like body of the giant octopus.

ACT FOUR

TO DIE IN THE SKY

As HE RAN upward through the jungle darkness, Illya Kuryakin realized with dismay that he, one solitary man fleeing a dozen or more pursuers, was playing the game all wrong.

To clatter along noisily as he was doing merely invited eventual capture. Knowing Lobba-Lobba far better than he, Sailor and his pack of THRUSH uglies could wait until he wore himself out. Then they'd close in.

Illya banged against a palm trunk, caromed off. He studied himself and tried a sudden change of tactics. He stopped stock still exactly where he was.

On the jungle slopes below, the beams of electric hand-torches criss-crossed like eerie white blades. Shadows of men flickered among breaks in the foliage. Illya rubbed his face, sucked in a deep breath. He dropped to his hands and knees and crawled silently under the leafy protection of a prickly tropical shrub. There he sat, hunched over, arms clasped around his knees and his pistol held tight in his right hand.

"Where is 'e, Sailor?" a voice bawled down among the lights. "I don't 'ear 'im no more."

"Spread out, spread out, form a search line," Jackson shouted. "He may be holing up."

"Maybe he's lucked onto the cross-trail that goes up to the base," someone else suggested.

"Shut up and form a line, you scum. Get strung out a good distance."

The positions of the lights shifted, widened until each torch was a separate whitish diamond-burst of light.

Presently Sailor ordered: "All right. Start moving up the hill. Slow and steady. He can't get very far."

All Illya had to his advantage was the impenetrable inkiness of the rain-forest at night. The air beneath the fronds of the shrubbery was damp, sticky. Sweat congealed on the tip of his nose and fell off a droplet at a time.

Was he wise to try to avoid them this way? What if Napoleon Solo were alive and needed his help at the base further up? Did he dare delay like this?

Illya had no evidence to support the wishful conclusion that Solo was alive. Illya concluded that his primary responsibility was to seek out the THRUSH installation and destroy it.

To this end, he had to stay alive. He resigned himself to the perilous task at hand, the task of sitting absolutely still while the search line moved up toward him.

The flashlight-beams speared the darkness. They wigwagged back and forth as their operators swept the underbrush ahead of them. An interval of perhaps eight or ten feet separated each searcher. They were quite close now, less than a dozen yards off. One man would pass within a couple of feet to the left of the thick shrub under which Illya sat, holding his breath.

The light-beams flicked and flashed. The searcher coming up from Illya's right had already cast his beam higher up the hill. The man on the left, one of the Japanese Illya had seen in the bar of the Episcopalian Hotel, was moving more slowly. He swung his light back and forth in slow, meticulous swathes.

The tension nearly tore Illya Kuryakin apart. It took all of his strength and training to remain rock still as the Japanese searcher moved to within a yard of him.

Something tickled Illya's right leg just above the edge of his sock. He gave his leg a little jerk. The searcher swung his light-beam slowly toward the very bush beneath which Illya was hidden.

Illya's leg-jerk dislodged the cause of the itch. A hideous yellow spider tumbled down the slope of his ankle and stopped, quivering, on the toe of his right shoe.

Illya knew enough about insects to recognize a horrendously deadly Pacific species. If the spider bit him he might not die, but he would fall unconscious at once. And that would make him fair game for all the vipers and other lethal creatures abroad in the jungle.

The light-beam traveled slowly past the shrub, moving on to the right. It stopped traveling after a yard, then reversed itself. The Japanese was swinging it back past the clump of shrubs one more time—

The spider apparently could not decide whether to hop off Illya's shoe or return up his leg in hopes of finding a meal. After an agonizing delay, it decided on the latter course, moving briskly back toward the stained white cuff of his trousers.

Illya's flesh crawled. The light-beam was sweeping steadily toward the shrub, but he couldn't risk the spider's bite. He flicked the insect away with one quick brush of his gun-muzzle.

The light-beam caught the spider as it spun off into the air. The Japanese uttered a startled syllable. Illya hugged his legs and froze.

The light-beam remained fixed on a point of earth a foot from Illya's concealed shoes. Pinned in the circle of brilliance, the spider bolted into the dark.

With an exclamation of revulsion, the Japanese whipped his flashlight up. He directed it toward the summit of the island and moved away rapidly.

Illya almost fainted with the exhilaration of taking a deep breath. He blessed the spider silently, and hoped it found a palatable dinner somewhere else.

Soon the lights diminished to pinpoints higher on the hillside. Illya rose. The searchers would be coming down eventually, though. He had to move fast.

Illya Kuryakin was lucky. In a matter of minutes he found a thick, gnarled tropical tree with branches which would support him.

He dragged himself up to one of them and stretched out. Voices rattled in the distance. The lights returned. This time the searchers were less methodical. One man passed directly under the branch where Illya lay. The man only flicked his light casually around the lower part of the trunk. Off in the muggy dark, Sailor was uttering all sorts of blasphemies and indecencies. The search had failed.

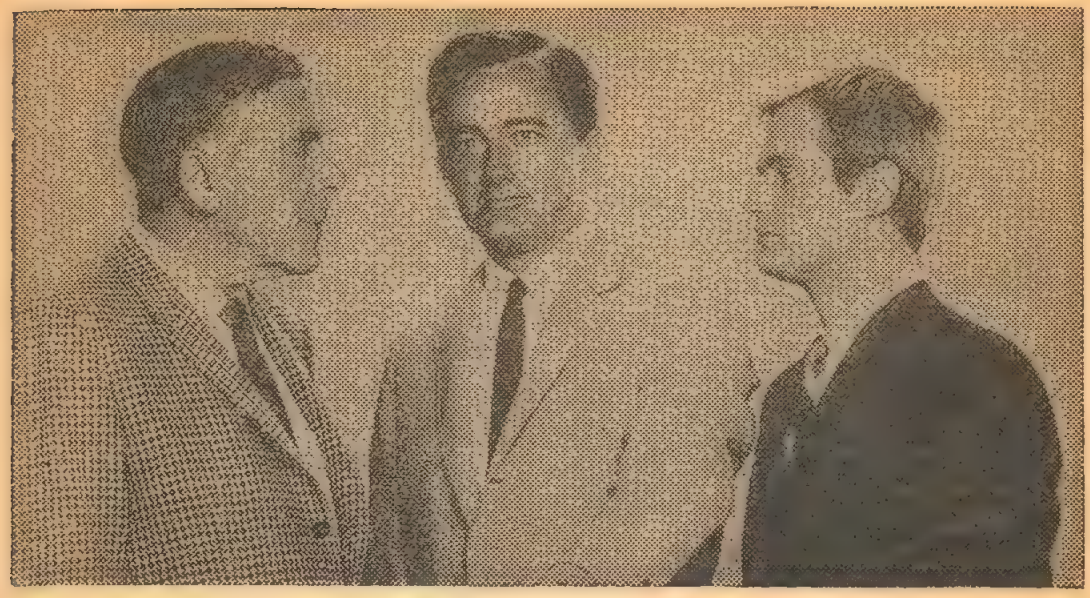
Illya remained in the tree all night. He was fairly comfortable even though his strained nerves didn't permit him to sleep. Several times during the hours before dawn the sky up near the summit flushed pinkly. Illya heard a rumble, which he adjudged to come from the not-so-extinct volcano.

When the first palings in the east indicated the approach of dawn, he climbed down. He stretched and started cat-footing up the slope. He found the going much less difficult now. Even the faintest light helped him pick his way through the underbrush with dispatch.

After he had climbed for perhaps ten minutes, the jungle thinned out. He came face to face with an immense slab of concrete that rose from the earth to a height six feet above his head. The concrete, the edge of an immense man-made plateau, ran into the distance to the left and right.

The humid morning wind carried sounds of men's voices. Down to the left, Illya spotted an iron ladder built into the vertical face of the concrete plateau. He broke from the cover of the tree, reached the ladder and pulled himself up.

When his head popped over the edge, he saw he was directly behind a small, square concrete build-



ing. Past one corner he saw part of a quadrangle, other buildings including a hangar-like structure toward which a squad of men in blue flight suits was dog-trotting.

Inside the hangar Illya Kuryakin clearly made out a pair of the saucer craft. He thought he detected the silhouettes of others further back in the same building.

As he was taking this all in, a THRUSH soldier with a rifle walked around the corner of the small building. The man's eyes bugged at the sight of Illya's head sticking up over the edge of the man-made plateau.

The guard fumbled to bring his rifle into firing position. His mouth dropped open.

Illya whipped his right hand up, fired his pistol once. The explosion was a flat pop, instantly diffused by the morning breeze. The guard corkscrewed slowly to the ground and never got his scream out.

Illya clambered up onto the level concrete. He dragged man and rifle into the shadows at the rear of the little building. There he proceeded to exchange clothes with the deceased functionary.

In another moment Illya briskly rounded the corner of the little building. The THRUSH rifle was draped in the crook of his arm. He paused to give his cap a tilt and look over the scene before him.

The concrete quadrangle was lined on all sides by buildings. Some of them were huge. On the quad's far side, a double line of men in coveralls poured out a barracks and disappeared down a stairway resembling a Manhattan subway entrance. The double file looked for

all the world like a herd of commuters rushing to work. Were they going to a manufacturing facility underground?

Directly to Illya's left, several small buildings were arranged in a row. The one nearest him bore a small sign reading, *Machine Tool Shop.* The next one's sign said *Office of Nutrition Department.* The third one—Illya's pulses quickened—was marked *Armory.*

Two THRUSH soldiers were moving in his direction along the line of buildings. Illya got going, marched ahead smartly. The soldiers passed him. One glanced over and touched his cap in a cordial way.

"Morning, Voboronsky."

Illya grunted, kept his head down and kept moving.

At the entrance to the Armory, Illya turned sharply left. He shoved at the door, found that it yielded with no difficulty. Behind him, a shout from one of the soldiers ripped out abruptly.

"That wasn't Voboronsky. I've never seen that fellow before!"

Illya dove into the building, flung up his rifle. A Thrushman on duty behind a wooden counter went for the pistol at his belt. Illya fired a second earlier, dodged as the Thrushman's bullet chewed cement and dust from the massive wall behind him.

Illya Kuryakin hadn't missed. The man at the counter slid down until his jaw hit on the wood. Blood ran out of his mouth as the weight of his body pulled him all the way to the floor.

Boots slammed outside. A whistle blasted. The little building was solidly constructed, with no other doors or windows. That was bad.

Shelves and racks at the rear held rifles, pistols, bandoliers of ammunition. With savage delight Illya spotted one more item.

Grenades, in neat rows like black eggs.

Illya vaulted the counter. He put down his rifle and rummaged among the ammunition boxes until he found what he needed for his pistol. He dumped a goodly supply in his pockets. Then he stuffed half a dozen grenades under his shirt and whirled around as the first of a squad of soldiers jammed in the door.

Illya snatched his rifle up, from where he'd laid it down, flicked the switch to automatic, squeezed the trigger as bullets fired by the soldiers began to eat into the wooden counter.

Illya dodged toward one of the high metal rifle racks, firing shot after shot. Two of the rather disorganized Thrushmen crowding the doorway bleated, fell back, clawed their middles and folded up dead.

A third soldier signaled the rest to draw back. Illya went up and over the bloodied, bullet-pocked counter in one long leap and hit the cement on the other side. His rifle bucked as he charged out the door.

The soldiers outside struggled to

get their pistols and rifles into firing position as Illya raced at them. Their shots whistled off at wild angles. Illya had the advantage of surprise. It wouldn't last long. More soldiers were coming on the run across the quadrangle. Illya chose the moment to leap over a corpse, cut sharply to the left and race down the side of the armory.

He went behind the next building, spun to fire at the corner. Several soldiers were already coming in pursuit. Two died under the impact of Illya's bullets.

He whirled around again, reached the far corner of the back of the building, cut toward the quad again. His chest had begun to ache. Things blurred around him in the breaking light of morning. He had no notion of where he was going. Running along between the concrete walls he felt like a rat in a maze.

His only hope now—a savage, angry hope—was to slaughter as many of them as possible before they finally converged and killed him.

TWO

JACKIE WOZNUSKY wailed in the flooded chamber: "Octop-p-p-pus!"

The cabbie's corpulent frame seemed to be consumed by a vast series of frightened quakes. Up to his neck in water with Sabrina, Napoleon Solo couldn't blame the hackie one bit.

Solo's stomach was cold as he watched the monstrous body of the octopus float toward them, its tentacles whipping and sloshing lazily in the water.

"A charming little pet, don't you think, Mr. Solo?" Brocade called over the loudspeaker from her position of safety in the booth.

Solo didn't bother to reply, or to voice the red fury he felt because she'd tricked him. He backed up slowly, moving away from the octopus and its flicking, reaching tentacles.

One whipped near his nose. Solo's stomach turned over at the sight of the hundreds of sucking orifices that opened and closed, opened and closed hungrily—

Coarse laughter sounded overhead. Solo assumed that THRUSH soldiers were gathering at the edge of the trap door, planning to enjoy the spectacle of death about to be enacted below. Well, Solo thought, if ever there was a time to use the couple of ace cards he'd been keeping since Westchester County, the time was now.

He'd wanted to save them until the final moment. He'd hoped to employ them on the SLAV craft in the THRUSH hangars. But nothing else could save the three of them now. He had no choice.

Solo twisted his head around, caught Sabrina's shoulder, shook her. "Sabrina, you've got to let go of me. I've got to get at my shoe."

"Speak up, Mr. Solo!" Brocade

called. "I can't hear your bleats of fright."

Numb with horror, Sabrina had both hands wrapped around Solo's right arm. He pried at her fingers underwater. Something slimy caressed the back of his neck. Jackie Woznusky let out a calf-like bellow of warning.

Solo jerked his head down, felt pain as half a dozen tentacle-suckers ripped loose from the nape of his neck. The tentacle waved wildly over his head. Solo let himself go limp, pulling Sabrina down under the water with him.

Warm though the water was, it revived her, shocked her out of her hysteria. Solo pried her fingers loose, shoved her back against the concrete wall and let her fend for herself. His fingers strained down until he had a grip on his left shoe.

Weird, distorted into a fun-house image by the water, the slimy body and tentacles of the octopus moved steadily toward them. Solo got his fingers under the edge of the crepe sole of his shoe, jerked hard. He peeled the entire sole off in one piece.

Kicking, he shot to the surface just as one of the octopus tentacles wrapped around his waist.

Another tentacle flew straight for his face. Solo held the crepe sole out of the water.

Brocade wore a concerned look in the booth. She began to cry shrill warnings to the soldiers overhead. Solo got the slit in the crepe sole open, pulled out both of the capsule-shaped pellets.

He caught one on the tip of his tongue and sucked it into his mouth. A sudden bite with his own teeth and his head would be blown half way up to the top of the volcanic mountain outside.

He was hardly conscious of the dreadful pain around his middle as the pressure of the tentacle increased. He acted almost without thought. Death was very close.

The tentacle waving in front of his face swept in toward him. Solo thrust the remaining capsule into one of the sucking orifices.

The octopus sensed that it had a tidbit. The tentacle swept back toward the body, toward a maw Solo couldn't see because of all the splashing, foaming water. *There's your breakfast, you bloody monster,* Solo thought and turned his head away.

The octopus ingested the demolition pellet and blew up with a thunderous report.

Water geysered. Pieces of gelatinous flesh flew in all directions. The tentacle around Solo's waist writhed, then relaxed and slithered loose. Solo opened his mouth, carefully shoved the other pellet into his right palm with his tongue, arched his arm back.

"Get down, Jackie!"

He let fly at the wall on his right and grabbed Sabrina.

Another mammoth explosion rocked the chamber. Cement tum-

bled in huge blocks as the entire side wall caved outward. The glass of the observation booth shattered, jagged pieces dropping into the water. Solo's lips peeled back from his teeth.

He'd hoped there would be air space beyond the wall he'd blasted. His fondest hopes had been exceeded. There was not only airspace, there was a brightly-lit corridor. And all the water in here was draining out of this chamber into the next.

"You soldiers!" Brocade screamed. "You soldiers up there—*jump down and catch them!*"

But the Thrushmen watching from above were reluctant to leap into the water. They didn't know but what Solo had another pellet ready. Solo shoved Sabrina and Jackie Woznusky toward the opening through which the water was running out.

He intended to leave that way himself. He glanced back once. Brocade's cheek ran with blood where glass had cut her. She was frothing with fury as she climbed onto the sill of the booth window so she could look directly up at the soldiers overhead and scream orders at them.

Swiftly Napoleon Solo sloshed across the pool. Before anyone could stop him, he reached high to grab Brocade's ankle.

Hair flying, arms flailing, she tumbled off the booth window sill into the water.

She came up bubbling and spitting. The soldiers had their weapons unlimbered now. Solo crooked an elbow around Brocade's neck and instantly converted her into a very effective shield.

Brocade struggled frantically, spitting out a cry at the solders: "Don't hesitate. *Shoot!*" But they were not so foolish as to assassinate Dohm's second in command.

Sabrina was already through the ragged hole in the concrete. Jackie Woznusky's fat belly was preventing his rapid passage.

"Pull, Sabrina!" Solo shouted, giving Jackie a shove in the seat with his right foot.

Like a fat cannonball Jackie shot through. He staggered to his feet on the other side. Solo climbed after him, dragging Brocade along.

Sabrina pointed to a stairway. In a moment they reached the top. Solo tripped a lever on a control panel and they were outside on the quadrangle in the dawn light.

In seconds Solo assessed the situation and found it very bad indeed.

He and his water-soaked friends had no weapons. Solo had Brocade for a hostage, but that was his only edge. The explosion had attracted attention. Across the quad to the left, a unit of soldiers drilling in quick-step rhythm were called to a halt by their officer. The officer peered toward the escapees, trying to identify them from a distance.

Directly across the huge expanse of concrete a crew of mechanics

was rolling one of the SLAVs out of the large hangar. One mechanic handled each of the vertical legs which bumped across the cement on their special rollers. As the saucer craft rolled from the shadowy hangar into the light, the mechanic nearest Solo and his friends shielded his eyes against the glare of the rising sun.

Down a line of concrete buildings immediately to Solo's right, gunfire rattled.

Brocade was squalling and kicking. Her language was crude, colorful and full of outrage. Solo decided he couldn't tolerate the dangerous distraction of the girl's kicks and scratches.

"My apologies, dear." He clipped her a second time.

Brocade folded into a manageable package. Solo hoisted her over his shoulder. Her head hung down his back. Right then, an oddly familiar figure in a THRUSH uniform burst from the cover of one of those buildings down on the right.

Napoleon Solo let out a wild whoop. "*Illya!*

Crouched on one knee and spraying every soldier in sight with his automatic-fire rifle, Illya Kuryakin didn't hear. Solo yelled his name a second time.

Illya glanced around, did a take. And suddenly Solo had the answer.

There across the quad was their one chance for escape—the SLAV with the mechanics clustered around it.

Illya Kuryakin broke in Solo's direction as the THRUSH soldiers behind him fanned out into a long line, began firing. Illya had to run a zig-zag pattern.

"Head for that hangar," Solo bawled. He pushed the corpulent cabbie with his free hand. "Jackie, you watch out for Sabrina."

Illya Kuryakin was halfway to them now. Solo pointed toward the SLAV outside the hangar. Illya changed direction, making a path that would intersect theirs. But more soldiers were massing. Bullets kicked up puffs of cement dust only inches behind Illya's racing heels.

The crackle of gunfire dinned in Solo's ears as he ran along behind his companions. Wheezing and panting, Jackie Woznusky still did a creditable job of helping Sabrina stay on her feet. Over his shoulder Solo heard Brocade mutter or groan.

Illya Kuryakin came running up. His dirt-smudged face broke into a weary grin. "Fancy meeting you."

"It may be a very short reunion. Keep running."

They pounded ahead. All of a sudden Napoleon Solo realized that only a few shots were coming their way, and those few were falling short. Sharp cries of THRUSH officers reached his ears. He thought he caught something about not hitting Dohm's assistant.

With Brocade hanging over his shoulder, they might make it after all.

Solo panted as he ran, "This young lady I'm lugging knows how to fly the saucers. Let's try to get aboard that one ahead."

Illya's eyes narrowed. "I'll encourage the spectators to give us room."

He got his rifle into firing position, depressed the automatic control, sprayed several bursts into the concrete just this side of the saucer craft. The mechanics scattered for cover. One leaped to drag down the wrist of another who'd located a pistol.

The mechanics too had recognized Brocade. If Dohm suddenly appeared on the scene it would be different. The egg-headed little madman wouldn't scruple about killing his second in command. But as long as the peons of THRUSH didn't know that—

"Get the landing stairs down!" Solo shouted at the mechanics. "Give 'em another burst, Illya."

Illya's rifle blasted. Two of the mechanics hopped to obey the command. In a moment the folding stairs had telescoped open.

In the aftermath of Illya's shots he heard Brocade mumbling again, talking to herself, probably semiconscious. She was growing heavy.

Illya Kuryakin let out a shout, near the saucer stairs. He scowled at the mechanics gathered in a little group. One of them fingered a wicked big wrench. But the presence of Brocade hanging over Solo's shoulder held them at bay.

Jackie Woznusky half-carried, half-pushed Sabrina up the stairs. Solo turned around, surveyed the quad. Platoons of soldiers were converging, all fully armed. No one was firing.

Illya Kuryakin backed up the stairs. Napoleon Solo followed. In a moment they were inside the dome-ceilinged control chamber with its circular wall of display panels and sequencing lights.

Without ceremony Solo dumped Brocade into one of the two black leather seat buckets in front of the main control board. He pinched her chin very lightly and shook her head at the same time.

"Time to come back from dreamland, dear."

Brocade's dark eyes opened, full of hate. She stared at him for a long moment. She said nothing.

"Illya," Solo said, "stroll up here with the rifle. That's good. Miss Brocade sweet, my friend's rifle still has sufficient ammunition to do you some harm. If you want to save your pretty skin, get to work on those controls and take us out of here. Fast."

In the ensuing silence Brocade bit her lower lip. The gleaming pearl in her pierced left ear caught the reddish gleam of a row of sequencing lights that flashed on and off. Finally Brocade smiled. It was a peculiar, contented, contemptuous smile Napoleon Solo didn't quite understand.

The girl flicked a switch in front

of her. One of the TV screens on the wall lit up. It showed a profusion of soldiers racing around in front of the saucer craft, peering up at it, puzzled. Obviously they didn't know whether to shoot.

Brocade threw another switch. The hatchway slid shut. More switches and levers and the powerful, whining roar of the craft's power plant made the control chamber vibrate.

"We are going up at full power," Brocade said.

Brocade still looked bemused. Solo turned to warn Sabrina, Illya and Jackie to get into the trio of bucket seats at the rear of the chamber. Brocade threw three levers in succession. The SLAV craft rose straight up with a sudden thrust that hurled Solo clear across to the other side of the cabin.

Illya Kuryakin let out a shout, went tumbling. Jackie Woznusky bleated, Sabrina clutched for support, couldn't find any, fell.

Solo smacked into Illya. Both of them went head over heels in a tangle, like a couple of low comedians.

The compartment floor tilted sharply. Solo had a dizzying glimpse of one of the TV monitors. It showed the quad, then the whole Lobba-Lobba complex including the smoke-belching volcano falling away at tremendous speed. The picture tilted as the saucer went angling obliquely upward into the bright Pacific sky.

"Slow down, Brocade!" Solo tried to crawl up the angled floor toward the controls. "Do you hear me? I said take this thing down to a normal speed or—"

"Miss Brocade will handle the controls, Mr. Solo. In the meantime, I shall deal with you."

The voice made Solo's neck crawl. From behind the row of three bolted-down bucket seats at the cabin's rear the ugly, misshapen head of Dohm rose from concealment.

The little man had a gigantic pistol clutched in his baby fingers. He stepped around from behind the seat buckets. He looked a bit taller. He had extra-thick soles on his shoes. The soles glinted like dull metal.

Dohm swayed with the motion of the craft. Brocade was see-sawing it back and forth through the sky, reversing thrust without warning to keep Solo and the others off balance. But Dohm did not fall. Solo realized that the thick metal soles must be magnetized.

Illya did not know who Dohm was, of course. But he sensed the awful peril of the moment, went crawling toward his rifle which had lodged against the kick-plate of a compact computer.

Dohm's ugly mouth pursed. "No. Do not reach for it or I will kill you."

Illya hesitated, clinging to the floor as best he could. Dohm lifted a ponderous right foot. He set it

down with a clank. In that way he advanced to a position near Napoleon Solo, who was on hands and knees and desperately trying to keep from sliding as the saucer craft pitched.

Dohm looked down, his lunatic's brown eyes glittering.

"You have nearly undone us, Mr. Solo. It was rather fortunate that I was inspecting this craft this morning, don't you think? I was aboard when Brocade's message came through. She said you planned to force her to take off. I slipped into hiding back there to wait for you."

Solo's mouth wrenched. "What message? She never had time to signal you."

Brocade glanced back, laughing. "Ah, but I did. While you were carrying me." With slim white fingers she touched her ear. "I hoped you would think I was merely groaning or muttering, Mr. Solo. Actually I was calling Dohm. It's necessary that I stay in contact with him, so I carry a little sending and receiving set. Decorative, isn't it?"

She laughed and flecked the pearl glowing in her pierced left ear.

Fear knocked Napoleon Solo's belly like a hammer blow. Victory had seemed so close.

Now Dohm's muddy brown eyes fixed on Solo in a glare of fanatical fury. With the saucer pitching violently from side to side, Solo couldn't get a secure foothold. Dohm licked his lips. His trigger-finger turned white with pressure.

"I see no reason to prolong this, Mr. Solo. We have quite a busy schedule on the ground this morning. Brocade my dear, keep Mr. Solo off balance a moment longer while I shoot him. *Au revoir,* Solo. A valiant effort. But second-best after all. Typical of U.N.C.L.E."

And he pulled the trigger.

Solo flung himself wildly away to one side. What saved him was the blur of something flying through the air—

Illya Kuryakin had snatched his rifle. With no time to aim and fire it, he'd flung it like a spear a split second before Dohm fired. The rifle smacked Dohm's right temple just as he pulled the trigger.

The bullet intended for Solo caught Illya in the left rib cage. Giving a cry, Illya dropped. Dohm's finger worked by reflex action.

Two more bullets blasted a hole into the metal cabinet of the compact computer. Metal twisted. Sparks began to shoot from damaged wires inside. Suddenly flames shot out of the hole in the computer's case.

By that time Napoleon Solo had reached Dohm's legs, wrapped his arms around them and given a terrific tug. With a snap both of Dohm's magnetized boots came loose. He spilled over backwards.

Solo pulled his fist back to smack Dohm's jaw. Another sudden reversal of the direction of the saucer

sent him flying the other way. He rolled into the bulk of Jackie Woznusky, who had been floundering helplessly on the floor for some time now.

Dohm turned over on his side, braced his free hand under him, managed to get his magnetized boot-soles on the floor again. Standing, he fastened both hands around the butt of his pistol.

Dohm's eyes shone crazily in the spit and glare of flame from the burning computer. His head seemed like something out of a nightmare.

Jackie Woznusky kept floundering. Every time Solo tried to rise, the ship pitched again. This, plus Jackie's flying, ham-like hands, knocked Solo askew four times. Dohm's forearms were shaking, so violent was his rage as he tried to get the pistol sighted on Solo.

Brocade reversed the controls again. Illya's rifle came sliding toward Solo. He lunged out for it. Dohm shrieked mindless syllables of rage. He shot.

The bullet missed, plowing a channel in the metal floor. Solo's sweating fingers caught the rifle stock, slid off. Dohm aimed again—

Solo threw all of his strength into a last hurtling roll toward the rifle. He clutched the stock against his midsection, clawed for the trigger as something livid-hot ripped into his left thigh.

Dohm had hit him.

Solo's rifle banged and banged. The echoes of the shots blended thunderously into one another.

Riddled, Dohm died on his feet.

He dropped his pistol. His eyes dimmed as he realized the finality of his failure. His mouth went slack. He could not fall because the magnetized soles of his boots held fast to the floor. But his upper body went slack, twisted. He wobbled there, head and hands touching the floor, a grotesque corpse in the shape of a U.

THREE

CLUTCHING THE rifle, Napoleon Solo staggered toward the front control chairs. Jackie helped Sabrina to her feet. Illya's uniform blouse was smeared with blood on the left side. He was unusually pale. But he'd managed to locate an extinguisher, was spraying chemical foam over the compact computer. The last of the fire went out drowned in a billow of white.

"Now," Solo said to Brocade, his face wolfish, "I trust there are no more stowaways. Fly this thing straight, my dear, or you'll be as dead as your friend."

"V—very well." Brocade was clearly very frightened all at once.

The TV monitors showed that the saucer craft was making a low, sweeping pass over the plateau installation. Illya limped up beside Solo. Solo stared at the peculiar bulge of Illya's blood-soaked coat.

Illya Kuryakin unfastened the

jacket buttons. He reached under.

"I just remembered these. I took them when I was temporarily cornered in the armory."

Solo looked at the cross-hatching of the grenade in Illya's palm. Suddenly the corners of his mouth curled up.

"Brocade dear, you are going to make one more pass over the base. You're going to go right over that volcano, which shows every sign of being very active. My friend Mr. Kuryakin will hold the rifle at your pretty little head so you don't try to fool us. Fly level. Go as slowly as you can. And keep the craft steady."

Solo's grin widened in spite of the bone-weariness he felt.

"Jackie? Are you in good working order?"

The cabbie said he thought so.

"You'll have to hang onto me. Sabrina will pass the grenades."

It was tricky. The saucer craft hatchway was open full, Solo clung desperately to the doorframe with one hand. The wind howled over him, threatening to pluck him out and drop him through the air to die.

Jackie had his feet braced around a stanchion. Both hands were fastened on Solo's waist. One after another, the grenades were passed from Sabrina to Solo. He dropped them straight down into the curling white smoke.

Brocade was flying low over the slaggy crater. Solo could see dull, smoky redness bubbling down in its heart. The first grenade tumbled in lazily. Then the second. Only one missed.

"Take her up fast and shut the hatch!" Solo cried, dragging himself back out of the grip of the wind.

The hatchway slid shut on the blaze of blue sky. The saucer craft tilted. Solo and the others rushed to the TV monitor. Brocade watched too, in a kind of horrified fascination.

The top of the gigantic volcano literally blew apart.

Tidal-waves of lava washed forth. As the saucer craft made its final pass over the island of Lobba-Lobba ten minutes later, nothing remained of the plateau complex. The buildings, the quadrangle and the immense hangar containing the twenty-three SLAVS were already inundated beneath broad rivers of burning molten rock.

It was not a pretty sight. From the ever increasing height, Solo could see little dots running from that wave of death, only to become engulfed in the stream of fire that devoured everything in its swift lethal path.

Nothing escaped.

Solo uttered a long, tired sigh. "Our people will be very interested in going over this ship, Brocade. Put it on a heading for Hawaii. But treat the ship carefully, dear. Don't bang it up. Don't try to crash-land in the ocean. You'd die right along with us. And that wouldn't be a

nice end for a pretty girl like you, would it?"

"You filthy—" Brocade began.

"Tut-tut," Solo said. "Ladies present."

Brocade bit her lip and obeyed him.

The lady Napoleon Solo had in mind leaned limply against him. Sabrina's lovely face showed the ravages of her experience. There was very little smartness left to her red cocktail dress. Rips, oil stains, big smudges of dirt had completely ruined it. She gave him an oblique, tired smile.

"I will say, Napoleon, that when you take a girl on a date, you show her some sensational sights."

Solo's old, raffish grin looked almost normal. "I try."

Illya Kuryakin was weaving on his feet. Solo helped him to one of the rear bucket seats, examined the wound and satisfied himself that it was not so severe as it had first looked.

"How long will it take us to get to Hawaii, Brocade?" Solo asked.

"We're at full power," she answered sullenly. Sabrina was covering her with the rifle. "About seven and a half minutes."

Illya nodded. "I'll live until then."

Solo thought of something. "I'd better get on the radio, if there is such a thing aboard. I don't want the Air Force jets in Hawaii to come up and shoot at us. From the outside we probably look like the Martian advance guard arriving to conquer the Earth."

Leaving Illya, he started back to the control chairs. He passed Jackie Woznusky. The porky cabbie was staring into space, blinking his eyes faster than ever and muttering to himself:

"Finally. They're gonna believe me. They're really gonna believe me now when I tell them I rode on a flying saucer."

With a grin Solo said, "I wouldn't bank on it, Jackie."

"Huh?"

"I'm not even sure I believe the whole thing myself."

"You're absolutely rotten," Brocade said.

"Yes, but you're glad to be alive, aren't you?"

He'd caught her off guard. She flushed deeply. The fanaticism didn't run as deeply in her as it had in Dohm.

Brocade indicated the TV screen.

A dark smudge appeared on the otherwise unbroken line of the sea-and-sky horizon.

"There's Hawaii." Then, with a sad, tentative smile, she asked, "Will you come visit me in prison, Napoleon?"

Napoleon Solo noticed Sabrina watching him with a slightly jealous gleam in her eye.

He decided he'd had enough fights for one day.

"Let's talk about that later," he said.

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WHO LIVES BY THE SWORD

by ROBERT EDMOND ALTER

The man called Mr. Brown waited hopelessly in his shop, waited for the customer who would be his last. Today . . . tomorrow, it didn't matter. The last customer would be a fat man named Death.

A NONDESCRIPT man stepped into the curio shop and Brown knew immediately that he was not a customer. There was a studied look of wrinkled negligence about the man that was out of character for a tourist or a native of the little Italian Riviera seaport. To a person in Brown's peculiar position this left only one category: the man was from the dark world of espionage.

Brown felt the slick cold of the glass counter under his moist palms as a bird of apprehension began to flutter in his breast. He was a weedy, under-nourished looking man, and if he had ever had any romantic thoughts concerning acts of derring-do they had belonged far back in the mute daydreams of his youth. Now, approaching fifty, any suggestion of violent action left him in a state of trembling hesitancy.

The nondescript man glanced stiffly at the old vases and clocks and the dusty weapons of the 15th Century, as if he found these anachronisms incongruous to the gay world outside the shop door.

"You are Mr. Brown?" he said in a minor voice. "Mr. Jones wants to see you immediately." He did not use Italian or French; he spoke in Brown's native tongue.

"Of course I want to see your authority," Brown said in a forced effort to assume mastery of the situation.

The man drew a card from his pocket and placed it on the counter where Brown could read it. He said, "Let us get going."

Brown nodded distractedly, looking around the dingy shop. It

meant he would have to close up —he didn't believe in paying out wages for an assistant—and tell his wife. No, he couldn't tell her because he remembered she was out. As usual. Out shopping again, or so she always told him. But—

"I'll just leave my wife a note," he muttered.

"Better not," the man said, and he almost smiled for the first time. "In my end of this business you learn that notes can be incriminating. Even for your wife."

There might be something in what he says, Brown thought bleakly. There just might be.

The agent's car was parked by the ring of tiny shops under the ancient Genoese arches. It was like the agent, nondescript and dented. A lacemaker called to Brown from his shop door. *"Buon giorno, signore."*

Brown responded heavily and got into the car. He did not believe it was going to be a very good day.

The agent drove with practiced ease, up the Via Roma, past a *carabiniere* who gave them an imperious glance, through the upper town and along the cliff-hanging highway. Unhappily, Brown stared down at the picture-book seaport —the clutter of rakish white yachts, the cluster of little fishing boats, the vivid tangle of parti-colored stucco houses.

And suddenly he wished that he were back in his own little shop with his wife. Even if she was shrewish. Even if he did suspect that she was unfaithful.

She had gotten him into this business because of the extra money that she was forever hounding him about. Now he regretted it. He had been doing very well with his curio shop; he should have left things as they were. If only his wife were not so young, so obsessed with the misconception that the world was a playground.

His mental agitation was turning him sick with suspense. He faced the agent. "May I know where I am being taken?"

"I told you. To see Mr. Jones. He's rented a villa up here."

"Yes, but who *is* Mr. Jones?"

"I wouldn't know, any more than I know your real name—Mr. Brown."

The old villa was at the end of a promontory, clinging tenaciously in decay to the rocky bluff. The agent parked before some mossy marble stairs, led Brown along a musty corridor that had housed only mice and spiders for a decade, opened a carved oak door, and said, "In there."

Brown walked into a large stale room that contained lumps of decaying Gregorian furniture. A gaunt gray man stood waiting for him, smiling. Tall, brittle, courteous, he looked as if his ancestors had been living in castles for six hundred years. He made a wisp of motion with a spidery hand, indicating a chair.

"Mr. Brown? So good to meet you finally. Won't you sit down?"

Brown sat down. So did Mr. Jones. Mr. Jones smiled at him.

"Well well," he said. "It would appear, Mr. Brown, that our circumstances are a trifle out of the ordinary. Headquarters has sent me here to supervise a rather unsavory little matter, and it would seem that we will require your assistance."

Brown said, "My assistance?"

"That is correct, sir. After all, you *are* one of our agents."

"But all I do is observe the shipping that passes the harbor and record it for headquarters."

"For which you have been amply paid, I believe?" Mr. Jones' smile was seraphic. "Though of course there is no question that your basic motive springs from a sense of patriotism."

Brown gave a hesitant nod, suspecting that Mr. Jones was chiding him. He was not in the least patriotic; he had not lived in his own country for twenty-five years. He had needed the extra money to keep his extravagant young wife happy.

"Well well," Mr. Jones said. "The fact is, something has arisen which must immediately be taken care of—out of hand, one might say. And it is essential that we have your cooperation. Essential not only for the welfare of the organization, but for your own personal safety as well."

Brown swallowed. "My safety?"

"Exactly. You see, Mr. Brown, our adversaries have sent an agent to the Riviera. A very special sort of agent. In blunt words, an assassin, Mr. Brown."

The bird of apprehension began beating its wings frantically in Brown's chest. "An assassin? Here?"

"Upsetting, isn't it? Last week he was in San Rocco, and he—uh, eliminated our agent there. A man like you, Mr. Brown. A loyal worker called Mr. Smith. Now we cannot allow that sort of thing to continue, can we?"

Numbly, Brown shook his head. "He's here—now?"

"Um. Staying at the hotel in this very town. But don't be alarmed. We have a line on him: his description and his *modus operandi*. His cover was really quite good, but he made the mistake of overusage. He's a fat man with a good deal of gold in his teeth, and he affects a breezy, hearty manner, passing himself off as an affluent American tourist." Mr. Jones smiled waspishly.

"Really, his method of elimination is so elemental it borders on the crude. The plump gentleman seems to have a penchant for a pistol with a silencer." Mr. Jones shook his head disparagingly.

Brown was unable to speak. He was consumed by fear and by a sudden hatred for his silly selfish avaricious wife.

"Not to worry, Mr. Brown," Mr. Jones said comfortingly. "We have our own methods for handling this sort of bother, you know. I have brought with me a special agent whom you shall meet shortly. We will refer to him as 'Mr. D.' It is his job to remove the troublesome fat man; but he will require some assistance from—shall we say someone who is well oriented with the locality."

Brown had trouble with his voice. "You mean me?"

"Why yes, Mr. Brown. I certainly mean you."

"But you can't be serious," Brown said incredulously. "I'm not paid for that sort of thing."

"Oh, there will be an ample bonus for the task, Mr. Brown. Aside from the fact that you will be saving your own life."

Brown said with horror, "But *I*

can't! I simply can't do it. I don't —" He was at a loss for words.

Mr. Jones steepled his spidery fingers and pursed his thin mouth.

"I trust, Mr. Brown," his tone was mildly severe, "you will not make the mistake of giving me the impression that your services are no longer useful to the organization? I would regret being forced into a position of having to give Mr. D. an order which I should certainly find distasteful. You understand me, Mr. Brown? Hm?"

Brown nodded slowly, automatically. He understood Mr. Jones. Only too well.

MR. D DROVE Brown back to town. He had a young-old face and he wore pomade on his thick black curly hair. He had the aspect of a Gypsy charlatan or a Parisian pimp. He was very self-satisfied.

"This is really a very simple matter," he said airily. He used one hand to drive and the other to make Latin gestures in the air.

"The only awkward part is arranging to get him alone. The rest is simplicity itself. I will observe the fat agent today, study his habits, and tonight we shall see what can be done."

Brown was gnawing at his lower lip. "I just wish you could do this thing quickly." He could not bring himself to say "we."

"No," Mr. D. said. "No, no. The knife, the bullet, the garotte: these methods are shoddy. There is no artistry in a bullet. A knife, perhaps; a thrust under the ribs, just so, and then a flick of the wrist to turn the blade and let air into the wound—"

Brown shuddered. "Please—"

Mr. D. took a deadly hairpin turn with one hand and two wheels. He was saying, "Besides, Mr. Jones' orders were quite explicit."

It had been the last thing Mr. Jones had said to them as they were leaving the villa—

"Nothing crude, Mr. D. We don't want to put ourselves on a par with our enemy. A nice neat accident is indicated, I believe."

"Arranging accidents is my specialty, Mr. Jones," Mr. D. had said cheerfully.

Brown had said nothing, had sat on the car seat in a sweaty slump like a bag of damp wash, wondering if he was going to be sick.

The car leaned around another treacherous curve, and a youth on a bicycle missed death by inches. Mr. D. was still talking.

"I had a situation such as this in the Aegean Islands once. A small seaport, the quay deserted after midnight, the tide down to the lower steps—we simply held our man under water for three minutes. I held his head while my assistant had his hands. Put up quite a fuss with his feet, however—"

"No," Brown gasped. "Please, no."

Mr. D. glanced at him inquiringly. "Something?"

"Just watch the road, please," Brown muttered.

He wanted to jump from the car, run away from Mr. D. and Mr. Jones and the fat man; run from his wife and the town where he had lived for eight years. But he knew that he lacked the fortitude to try to start all over again somewhere else. The bird in hand was vital to Brown's craven nature. Without security he was nothing.

Mr. D. stopped the car in the piazza, nearly overturning a *fragole* stand. "Where is this hotel where the fat agent is staying?"

Brown told him; there was only one deluxe hotel and it stood high behind the town. Other than that there were only two tiny *alberghi.*

"And your shop is where?" Mr. D. asked.

Brown pointed across the piazza. "But what about me?" he fretted. "What if this fat man already knows who I am and he comes into my shop today while I am alone? I wouldn't stand a chance."

The Gypsy-faced agent dismissed the thought with his hand.

"Have no fear. The moment I leave you I will attach myself to his fat shadow and we shall pass the day like a pair of lovers. He shall not so much as scratch his ear but what I will observe him at it. You see? I shall be acting as your bodyguard. *Arrivederci!*"

Brown trudged across the piazza like a man going to a dread doom. His wife was still out. Naturally. But he was too harassed to care. He stayed in the back of the shop and watched the front door with a wary eye, ready to make a frantic escape through the rear alley should a fat man—any fat man —suddenly enter his store.

The apprehensive day dragged itself out to sea and night came in unobtrusively. Brown had had only four customers and they had all been female tourists. Two of them were young girls in brief bathing suits who had giggled incessantly, and Brown had wondered why they should find their world so much gayer than he found his. It hardly seemed just.

Then his wife came home and gave him a flat look; glanced in the till, muttered, *"Pesci!"* and went upstairs to cook his dinner. He watched her go, thinking, *if you only knew what I am suffering for you.* He had never told her about his espionage work. His trust in humans, especially his wife, was extremely limited.

He had no appetite that night. He looked at a mushy zucchini squash and thought he was going to be sick. It looked like something that had died a disgusting death. He drank a little wine and even that went sour in his touchy stomach.

"What's wrong with you?" his wife demanded. "You haven't touched your food."

"I'm not hungry."

"That's fine. I spend half the day

over the hot stove, and you're not hungry!" She stood up. "I am going to the cinema with Josette. *Gone With the Wind* is on again and I'll be late."

With Josette or Jose? He wondered, watching her. Her torso, after the nature of her race, was starting to thicken. Her nylon dress was so tight she was beginning to look like one of those girls who strolled in the piazza every night.

Once again a passion of hatred overwhelmed him and for an irrational moment he nearly yelled at her, "Do you realize I might be killed just so you can look and act like a tart?"

But he restrained his emotion. He said, "Very well."

He listened to her plastic heels click clicking down the stairs, heard the door shut. He slouched in his chair, toying with his wine glass. He had not seen or heard from Mr. D. all day and, in his anxiety, he began to wonder if the matter could possibly have resolved itself. Maybe the fat man hadn't been able to pinpoint Brown and had left town. Maybe Mr. D. had found an opportune opening and had already taken care of the fat man. Maybe—

A knock sounded on the shop door.

Brown snapped to his feet and looked wildly around for a weapon. Then, getting himself somewhat in hand, he tiptoed over to the front window and looked into the lighted street. Mr. D. was standing below. Brown groaned and went slowly downstairs to let him in.

"Very nice," Mr. D. said, peering at the shadowy *objects d'art*. "Very nice cover you have here. Looks authentic. Well, get your hat and we'll see what we can do about your fat friend."

"He's—he's still here, then?"

"Of course. I just left him at one of the sidewalk cafes. He's drinking everything in sight and having a wonderful time. He really works his rich American cover to the hilt. But he can't fool me. I had a drink with him earlier this afternoon."

Brown gawked at the Gypsy-faced agent. "You did?"

"Certainly. That's part of my method. The personal contact. Very revealing. I had him spotted in a moment."

"But who did he take *you* for?"

"A dealer in pornography." Mr. D. grinned. "It's a cover I use every so often. It allows one to work openly in a secretive manner, *n'est-ce-pas?*" He reached into his coat pocket. "Here—I even carry some snaps to substantiate my story."

"I don't want to see them!" Brown said. "What are we going to do now?"

"Simply observe the fat one until he makes a move. It's very possible that he might make a mistake tonight, and we'll want to be

there to correct it for him, eh? And then—*poof!*"

BROWN AND MR. D. sat in the car at the foot of a small twisted street which was a tributary of the piazza. The gaunt uprearing houses hung darkly over their heads. They were staring across the way

at a fat man who was sitting at one of the sidewalk tables with two local girls.

The fat man acted drunk. He laughed in a great roaring voice and made gay passes at the giggling girls with his pudgy hands. He was bloated, vulgar and false, but he gave an impression of prosperity as he sat there sipping his drink. He looked like an American big businessman who had left his family at home and was on a spree.

"He truly plays up the part, eh?" Mr. D. said sneeringly. "Fat fool. I had him spotted in a moment."

"Yes. You've said that before." Brown's nerves were ready to fly apart. He couldn't stand this waiting for something to happen, this not knowing what to expect or what might be expected of him. Mr. D.'s verbal self-esteem was too much. Brown, who had never had any, didn't admire bald conceit.

The tourists had commenced to stroll off into the mysterious dark; a waiter began to fold the tablecloths. It was midnight. The two local girls were on their feet, their young vacuous faces no longer laughing. They seemed to be having an argument with the fat man. He was laughing drunkenly. The girls went off, taking short quick angry steps, their highheels sounding loud on the cobbles in the sudden silence of the deserted piazza.

"Ah ha!" Mr. D. said melodramatically. "Fatty had just dropped his cover. Had he really been an American tourist he would have gone home with at least one of the girls. But he's sent them away."

Brown wet his lips, watching the distant fat figure lurch to his small pointed feet.

"Why?" he whispered.

"Because he has something else to do, obviously."

"But such as what?"

"Perhaps he intends to pay your shop a late visit tonight."

"My shop?"

Mr. D. looked at him in the dark. "Must I explain everything to you like a child? He has been sent here to do a job; to uncover *you* and put you out of the way, quickly. Ah, there he goes."

The fat man was going drunkenly across the piazza, bobbling like a captive balloon. He started up the Via Roma.

"He's going away," Brown said. "He's not going near my shop."

"Well, of course not! You don't expect him to just walk over to your place and knock on the door, do you? He has his method." Mr. D. grunted. "Lot of good it will do him though."

He switched on the ignition. The motor caught with a harsh cough and then settled down to purr. The fat man wobbled up the empty street and was blotted out in the inky dark.

"What are you going to do?" Brown asked nervously.

Mr. D. said tensely, "Give him a headstart. We don't want to flush him too soon. So. Now we go."

He put the car in gear and let it out, the vehicle creeping around the corner to the next street like a cautious ferret emerging from its burrow. Far up the lonely street they could see the grotesque shape of the fat man.

Mr. D. eased the car up the Via Roma, keeping the lights dimmed. The fat man took a jog to the left and started laboring up a steeply sloped road into the wooded hills. The car purred after him, staying a safe distance behind. The night was very dark now with the looming trees, and the bougainvillea was like thick velvety drapes.

"But he's going back to the hotel," Brown said.

"Probably to get his pistol." Mr. D.'s voice had a rasp to it, like a file drawn slowly across a metal bar. "Did you think he would walk around all day wearing it on his arm like a housewife's shopping bag?"

His small eyes searched the dense darkness on all sides.

"Looks lonely enough," he murmured. "Perfect. I knew I would catch him out." He gave it the gas and flicked on the highbeams. The car lurched forward with a deep throated growl.

There were no sidewalks; the fat man was weaving along near the righthand berm. He heard the car coming and turned to look back as he paused on a level stretch of road. The headlights hit his big white blank face and he blinked his eyes defensively and turned away, staggering with the vagueness of drink.

The car growled after him in low gear for thirty feet, and then Brown heard Mr. D suck his breath as his foot jammed the accelerator, and they hurtled toward the fat illuminated man like something flung from a catapult.

The fat man spun around, off balance, seeing the twin glaring lights rushing him, blinding him—his large moony face now a plastic blob of gawking horror—and he threw up a short thick arm and tried to leap his huge body clear,

to the right, but Mr. D. wrenched the wheel savagely and the car careened in a wild swerve as Brown cried, *"God!"*

They hit the fat man with a vibrant *thomp* that Brown felt in the seatframe, and the huge helpless thrown body came right over the hood like a sea-tossed baby whale, the stubby arms outflung and the fleshy shock-frozen face coming at the windshield, at Brown. He ducked automatically to the left, cringing, and then the fat body was gone, vanished completely, and D. was braking the car.

"Beautiful!" he said and started to chuckle. "Walked right into it! Come on. Let's see what's left." He started to get out, but Brown was still cringing in the corner.

"No," he whispered. "No. *I don't want to see it!*"

Mr. D.'s dark Gypsy face lost its humor.

"Don't be a fool," he snapped. "I might need your help. You don't think I brought you along just for the ride, do you? *Now do what I say.* Get out."

Brown got out of the car. Some forty feet back a great bloated shape humped in the dark road. Mr. D. walked toward it crisply. Brown moved as though he were approaching a beached squid he thought might still be alive. Mr. D. hunkered over the body and thumbed up one of the eyelids. The fat bleeding ruined body gave a low moan.

Brown winced spastically. "Oh God, *he's still alive!*"

"Yes," Mr. D. said testily. "You wouldn't believe it, would you? Well, it often happens this way. He'll die shortly, of course; internal hemorrhage. But we can't afford to wait around for it."

Brown wanted to be sick. "What are you going to do?"

"Get the car. Be quick."

Brown didn't understand. "What?"

"I said get the car. Back it down the road fifty feet. We have to be consistent. It must look like an accident."

"You mean *run over him again?*" A paralysis of horror overcame Brown. He couldn't move. "I can't. I simply *can't* do it!"

Mr. D. straightened up, grimacing with disgust. "You're certainly being a big help to me," he said sourly. "Very well. Stay here and see that he doesn't flop about." He walked toward the idling car.

Brown shuddered, staring down at the crushed toadlike body. He stepped in place, unconsciously, first one foot, then the other, like a small child who has to visit a restroom. The fat man's hands scrambled weakly in the dirt and his huge back moved.

"He's trying to get up!"

"Then hold him, you fool! I'll only be a moment."

Brown crouched over the repugnant body with a tremor of revulsion. The fat man's pudgy fin-

gers were scrabbling again and the diamond on his left pinky glowed like a little chip of ice. Brown groaned and closed his eyes and placed a hand on the fat back.

"Please don't," he whispered. "Please don't move."

The car lurched by him in reverse gear, drawing its lights backwards. The fat man's back convulsed and Brown snatched up his hand as if from an electric charge. "Hurry. *Hurry,*" he whimpered.

The two white crystalline lights were glaring at him like the glowering eyes of an Eocene monster. He heard Mr. D. rev the motor; then the car accelerated angrily and came up the road in a rush, and Brown leaped back into the berm's dark turf and turned his face into the patterned bougainvillea.

He heard the wheels bump twice, going *thlomp thlomp,* and heard the brakes grab. But he didn't see any of it. He was busy being sick in the weeds.

"That's got it," Mr. D.'s voice spoke behind him. "Well, let's be on our merry way. Oh, cover that up. Mustn't leave evidence of any kind lying about."

Brown kicked some dirt over his mess. Then, numbly and empty to the point of being void of physical sensation, he staggered over to the car and opened the door. But his intuitive fascination couldn't resist one dreaded last look.

The fat man's body no longer looked like a body in the dark. It looked like a partially deflated air mattress. Brown got into the car wearing a stark expression. Mr. D. put it in gear and fed it gas and they started on up the road. He chuckled.

"Well, this should make Mr. Jones very happy. He certainly picked the right man when it comes to arranging accidents." The Gypsy-faced agent was wearing his elation like a tip-tilted crown.

"Where are we going now?" Brown asked dully.

"I'll run you on home. Then I'll go and report to Mr. Jones."

Brown thought for a moment. Then he straightened up.

"No," he said with a note of firmness. "I'd better go with you. Mr. Jones mentioned something about a bonus."

It was noon, a slow time for the shopkeepers in the piazza. Brown was alone in his shop. His wife was out buying a new pair of shoes; he had offered her the money in a surprising euphoriac mood, and she had been so startled by the unnatural gesture that she had actually hugged him. He hummed to himself as he dusted his shelves and stock.

What had happened the night before had been exceedingly distasteful; yes— But it was over with now and it had been for the best. Now he would simply have to put it out of his mind. Now his life was

no longer in jeopardy and he could continue his existence in the same manner he had been doing for the past eight years. Only with more money; Mr. Jones had been very liberal with his bonus.

All in all, his life had had its sticky, unpleasant moments, but it had its merits too.

A man can get used to death if he lives beside it long enough. The pay was good and a chap reached retirement age early.

The front door opened and a stout man, an obvious tourist type stepped into the dingy shop and closed the door softly behind him.

"Mr. Brown?"

"Yes?" Brown said, looking up brightly.

The stout man reached inside his white seersucker jacket, saying, "Just wanted to be sure I had the right man." He smiled broadly, showing a great deal of gold in his large square teeth, and drew a long black metallic bulb-muzzled object from under his armpit.

Brown's last thought was a mute scream of horrific outrage:

That stupid cocksure conceited Gypsy—The wrong man!

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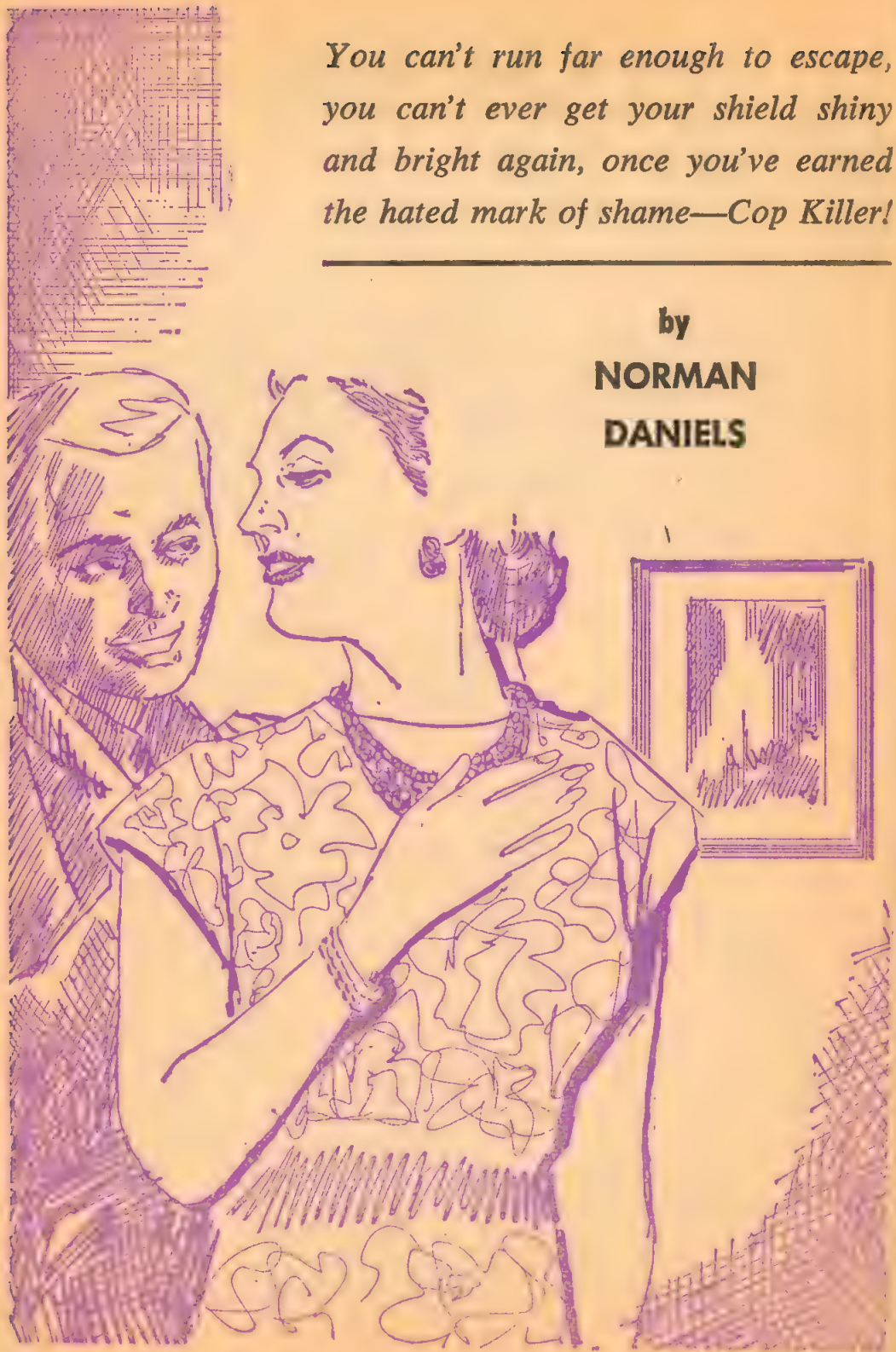

BURDEN OF GUILT

MATT RIORDAN said, "Carol may have that new fur stole to show off, but she's got a long way to go to reach your class, honey."

Molly Riordan looked around at her husband while he tried to find the necklace clasp. "You've got blarney on your tongue, Matt, but it's nice to hear."

"Hold still," he said, and got the clasp in place. She really was a beautiful woman, this Molly Riordan of his.

Tall, with the snapping blue eyes and the rousing red temper of his own breed.

"Come to think of it," he said. "I forgot my own jewelry."

He opened the drawer in the living room table and took out the snub-nosed .38. He slid it into the holster he wore under his coat, at the hip. Then he looked up at the ceiling.

"How long do you think Sam and Carol will be up there?"

"Until Carol thinks she has the new stole draped just right. You might as well sit down."

"The hell with it," Matt said.

He walked into the kitchen of the apartment, found the mop and banged the end of it against the ceiling. At that corner of the kitchen, the ceiling looked as if it had been studded with a blunt instrument over a period of years.

Upstairs, somebody stamped on the floor in answering signal. That would be Sam's heavy shoe, but it was no guarantee he could move Carol very fast.

They came down in fifteen minutes. Matt let them in, Sam first. They'd gone to school together, joined the force together. They were both detective sergeants, though not attached to the same

precinct. Sam had gone a little to fat these last few years, and maybe wasn't on the ball as he used to be, but Matt thought of him as a good cop.

Carol was something else again. A diminutive, doll-like creature with red hair that had a cast of orange in it. Matt remembered when it was plain brown. Carol swayed into the apartment, the new mink stole glistening like a jewel over her shoulders.

Matt noticed a fragment of the look on Molly's face when she first saw it, and Matt ground back the desire to swear. The way Sam took chances, charging all that stuff, was more than Matt would be tempted to do, but that didn't mean he never wished Molly couldn't have the same things.

Molly exclaimed over the fur, tried it on. Sam was telling him how he was in hock for the next two years because of the damned dead minks; then they heard the buzzing of the phone upstairs in Sam's apartment.

Carol said, "Sam, run up and answer it. If it's my mother, she'll yak for an hour and we've got to get going if we want dinner."

Sam went upstairs and Matt sat down disgustedly to wait. It was already an hour and a half past his time for eating and he was hungry. Sam came right down.

"The breaks we get," he said. "Precinct. I've got to get right over."

"Oh, Sam!" Carol chided. "And me with my new stole."

"Can't help it, darling. Have to run now. See you."

He was gone and presently Carol drifted back upstairs and Matt still sat disgustedly. Molly took off her necklace. "There's some turkey left from Sunday. I'll make sandwiches. Matt, would you run down to Hoffstetters and get some ice cream?"

"Sure," he said, glad of something to do.

He rode the elevator to the lobby, walked out the street and was half a block from Hoffstetters when he heard his name hissed. He stopped quite casually, looked about him and then drifted over to peer into the windows of a darkened store with a deep doorway.

Charlie was in the doorway. Charlie was a stool pigeon, one of the best. His voice came out of the shadows. "This one's worth twenty, Sergeant. It's big."

"All right," Matt said. "You know I pay off if it's important enough."

"Stacy Saunders," Charlie said, and Matt's back hairs rose. There wasn't anybody on the face of the earth he'd rather meet than Stacy Saunders.

"Okay," Matt said.

"I been nosin' around, like you asked me to. I spotted him, Sergeant. I saw him goin' into a tenement house. Two twenty-five Oak. I followed him. He went into num-

ber three hundred nine. So help me, that's on the level."

Matt found a twenty dollar bill. He couldn't afford it; the department had no provisions to repay him. But he'd have borrowed from a loan shark to get enough money to pay for information about Stacy's whereabouts.

Charlie took the bill, jammed it into his pants pocket. "I also got a little bonus," he said. "On good authority, Stacy is figurin' on takin' a long ride to get lost for a couple of years. Everythin's all set for him, so you gotta get him now or never."

Matt drifted away from the store window, paused at the corner and made certain nobody had been a witness to this transaction. Then he went into the nearest drug store, entered a phone booth and called Inspector Morrison.

"I'm going in alone," he said. "If Stacy is holed up, I'll keep him that way, but send help fast and lots of it."

Matt walked rapidly around the corner to Oak Street, found the right address and went in. It was a garden variety of tenement, complete with the smells and the dust he'd grown used to. He went up the steps softly, gun in his fist. Stacy was a man who fired at his enemies on sight.

Number 309 was halfway down the hall. Matt put his back against the wall, sidestepped down it and was close enough to reach out and try the doorknob when the six-year-old boy came catapulting out of a tenement further down the hall. The boy spotted the gun in Matt's fist.

"Ma," he yelled. "Ma—There's a man with a gun!"

Matt went flying down the hall, grabbed the yelling boy, whipped him back into his own tenement and said "Police," to his mother.

Then he ran back to the tenement where Stacy Saunders was supposed to be hiding. He twisted the knob and, somewhat to his surprise, found the door unlocked. He kicked it wide. Inside was darkness, but only for a second. Twin streaks of flame tried to finger him out. He fired straight at the source of those shots. Someone screamed, high: pitched and wild; then there were a few steps and a crash.

Matt found the light switch, turned it on. He stared down at the man lying on his back. Sam always wore his badge pinned inside his coat and it sparkled up at Matt while his horror increased. He dropped to his knees, but he didn't have to examine Sam.

One bullet got him near his right eye. There wasn't much left to that side of his head. The other had smashed into the middle of his chest. Either one would have been instantly fatal.

Matt didn't come home until the next morning. He found Molly as sleepless as he'd been. She went to him and put her arms around

him and said nothing, wiser than most wives would have been. She got him to drink coffee and then a glass of orange juice. His mouth was already raw from too much smoking, but she lit him a cigarette and had one herself.

"How'd Carol take it?" he asked, and his eyes raised ceilingward.

"You may as well know now," Molly said. "She's taking it bad. I listened to her weep and wail, which she had a right to do, but when she began calling you names, I put her out. Don't think about it, Matt."

He stood up.

"I'm going out and get drunk," he said. "I keep seeing Sam. I can't stand it."

"Now wait," she tugged at his sleeve. "Wait, Matt. You're a cop, first of all."

"I'm not a cop," he said. "I turned in my gear. I'm finished. I'll never wear a gun again. That's final. I want no comment on it and please be good enough to let me go out and try to forget what Sam looked like after I killed him."

She didn't try to stop him then, and perhaps that was where she made her mistake. Matt drifted from one bar to another. He talked to no one, just drank slowly and steadily until he was in that sort of coma where he could stand on his feet, walk fairly steadily and get home some nights.

Molly always waited for him, always prayed that the phantom of Sam Travis would go away and cease tormenting her man. She never made a complaint, except to tell him Carol rarely failed to see him come home and had told others in the apartment house that Matt was just showing what he'd really been all the time.

Molly did call him on selling the car, but he heard her out and answered quickly, "As long as that car is around, I may drive it and I'd be a hazard to life and limb, my own included. The money for the car is in the bank—in your personal account where I can't get it."

"Have you tried to find work, Matt?" she asked. "You never tell me anything."

"I've applied for half a dozen jobs. Every time somebody asks if I'm the man who shot a fellow cop. That's when I walk out. Molly, that's what you'd better do."

"You need me too much for that, Matt. I'll watch over you, until this blackness gets out of your system. It will."

He laughed bitterly. "If all you're worried about, is my being protected, forget it. Inspector Morrison's been having me tailed. I'm watched wherever I go."

"Having you watched?" Molly asked. "Whatever for, Matt?"

"How do I know? Maybe he wants to see how long I get. Sort of a clinical survey. Maybe he figures I might jump off a bridge. Maybe

he wants to keep me out of trouble. Who knows? Who cares, for that matter?"

"Would moving away—maybe far away—would that help, do you think?"

"I doubt it, Molly. This thing lives inside me. I can't park it some place and run. The only way I can forget, is to paralyze the memory. Unfortunately, that comes only with paralyzing myself. Don't wait up."

It went on for two more weeks and twice Molly had to run down to some cheap bar and pay Matt's bill. He no longer even tried to get a job and he barely talked to her those early morning hours when he came home, which was not always.

Then he disappeared for two whole days and nobody had seen him around his usual haunts. When the phone rang that morning, she knew it must be about Matt and it must be bad. Inspector Morrison secretary sounded depressed too, when she made the contact and switched Molly over to Morrison.

"Molly," he said, "Matt's got himself into a mess. Drunk, breach of the peace and fighting. He's locked up. I thought you ought to know."

"I'll be down," she said and hung up on his protests that it wasn't necessary. She was in such a hurry, she took a taxi which she couldn't afford; during the ride, she made up her mind that she and Matt would go away if she had to get him stiff with drink and shanghai him.

She was taken straight to Morrison's office. She'd known him since before she and Matt married. He'd been at her wedding and given her a very beautiful sandwich toaster as a gift. Morrison was sixty-odd, a lean man with white hair, where there was any, and a brisk, efficient manner.

"Molly," he said, "you don't know how sorry I am about this."

"I've come to take him home," she said.

Morrison shook his head. "He's going to be brought into court, Molly."

"Don't give me that, Patrick Morrison," she said. "I wasn't a cop's wife for ten years not to know everybody locked up doesn't go to court."

"He has to!"

"Did he—" She almost said 'kill anybody' and stopped just in time. The well used phrase wasn't exactly appropriate. "Did he hurt anybody, do any great damage?"

"He got drunk and picked a couple of fights. He'll be fined. Maybe ten dollars. Molly, go home. There's nothing you can do."

She didn't budge. "Now see here, Patrick—what of the men you put on his trail? Why didn't they keep him out of this mischief?"

"Men following him?" Morrison frowned. "Did he say that?"

"Well, isn't it true?"

"Ah—in a way. Molly, how

many times did he mention this, and when was the last time?"

"Two days ago was the last time I saw him. Several times before that. And don't say it's not true. Matt's still smart enough to know whether or not he's being followed."

Morrison walked to the window, stood beside it, looking out, saying nothing. Molly watched him for a moment.

She said, "Patrick, it's not your boys following him. It's not a police affair at all. But he's being trailed. I'm going to find out why. I'm going to tell him that someone else—"

"Hold on, Molly," Morrison said. He went back to his desk, picked up the phone. "I'll be busy for two or three hours. Have my car brought around. My personal car." He hung up, sat down and shook his head. "I should have known it would come to this, Molly. A woman like you—"

"Would you mind telling me what you're talking about?" she demanded.

"We're going on a little tour," Morrison said. "Then we'll come back here and I'll tell you. Until then, keep an open mind about me."

"Very well," she said. "But maybe I should have dressed a little better for this conducted tour."

"Not on this one." Morrison sighed. "Come on—we're going to a city jail first."

It was to see Matt, she reasoned, and something was very wrong. Morrison used his cheap, eight-year-old car and in a few moments they were led down a long, dismal corridor toward the sound of the wails and yells, the howls and the moans. Molly was horrified before she even stared through the bars into the various cells at men who writhed on the bunks, or were being sick to their stomachs or just staring madly into space.

"Junkies," Morrison said. "Some are in stages of withdrawal. They'll all be treated and finally turned loose and one hour afterward they'll be back on the stuff."

"Dope?" she exclaimed. "What's that got to do with my Matt?"

"More than you realize, Molly. Look at that one. He weighs about eighty pounds. He used to be a welterweight fighter and a pretty good one. Come along now. We've two more stops."

The next was at a city hospital on an island, a hospital where there was as many guards as at the jail. Here the men—and women, mostly young, seemed happy and clean and well fed.

"They've withdrawn from the stuff," Morrison said. "It costs the taxpayer about two thousand dollars for each one. What it costs their folks in anguish and tears, can't be figured. Of these, maybe one in ten will make the grade. The rest—they keep coming back until—well, well, I'll show you."

She wouldn't go into the morgue building until Morrison assured her Matt wasn't there. Morrison did it coldly, callously. He showed her bodies. She was a policeman's wife. She could take it. She said so, and she did, though she'd never forget.

Molly looked down at one girl, not more than sixteen. As pretty a girl as she'd ever seen.

"Not her?" she asked.

Morrison shook his head. "Her mother owns a tobacco store. A man who needed money for a fix, held it up. This kid was behind the counter and the man was in a big hurry. When they need a fix, they're in a bigger hurry than anyone you ever knew. He shot her—for the twelve dollars in the till. Twelve dollars—she died for it so he could kill himself a little more. Have you had enough, Molly?"

She nodded and rode in silence back to his office. There he gave her a drink of water and a cigarette and sat down on the edge of his desk.

"Matt," he said, "is still a member of this department."

She gasped and looked up hopefully.

"Hold on," the inspector warned. "Matt's not aware of it himself. Here's what happened, Molly. Sam was crooked."

"Sam—Sergeant Travis?"

"Unfortunately, yes. He'd sold out to a man named Stacy Saunders."

Molly nodded slowly. "That explains the mink stole and all the other things that wife of his had. She up-staged me, flaunted what his money bought. Oh, but I'm going to tell her off!"

"You're going to say nothing. Not a single, solitary word. Not to Sam's widow, or Matt, or any one else."

"Not Matt?" she asked.

"Especially not Matt. Molly—Matt was tipped off that Saunders was in that tenement. It was a good tip. He was there. Sam went to meet him. Sam had been checking the department to see how far we'd progressed in our fight to link Saunders with dope selling."

"So that's it," Molly said grimly. "That's the reason for the tour."

"I had to make sure you were impressed."

"I was," she said. "You keep talking, Patrick."

"Saunders is an educated, highly

intelligent man. He also has the ability, or maybe the facilities—to simply vanish when he wishes. He thinks we want him on another charge, a lesser one, and he's kept out of the way. However, word reached him we might have connected him with the drug racket. Now if we nail him on that, he knows what'll happen. If he thinks we know Sam sold out to him, he'll run and hide. He'll crawl so deep we'll never find him."

"I should think that might be a good way to get rid of him," Molly said.

"Molly, he could still direct the organization that's responsible for what you saw today."

"All right. But where does Matt fit in?"

"Saunders was in the tenement that night. Matt would have surprised both of them, but some kid in the building let out a yell about Matt having a gun. Saunders went out the back way and Sam stayed behind to cover his escape. Of course, Sam had no idea it was Matt."

"Then Sam tried to kill Matt first? Matt had reason to shoot back, and if he killed Sam, then it wasn't through carelessness!"

"No, not through carelessness. Molly, now comes the difficult part. Saunders is having Matt trailed. Oh, he won't hurt him," he added. "Saunders just wants to be positive that Matt's not putting on an act. That he actually did resign, that he's gone to the dogs completely because he—and we—have no idea Sam was tied to Saunders."

Molly looked him straight in the eye. "You're a clever man, Patrick. You knew I'd raise the roof off this building if I hadn't seen what Saunders has done. Very well. What happens now?"

"Nothing. The surer Saunders gets that Matt is really broken down, the sooner he'll come out of hiding. He can fight the charge we've hunted him on, stall it for months. But not any dope charge. We can destroy him with that, if we know he's mixed up in it. Saunders isn't quite sure. It all depends on Matt."

"You're asking too much, Patrick," she said. "Matt can be trusted to know."

"That's where you're wrong, Molly. Matt has to put on an act that's not almost perfect. It has to be absolutely perfect. Let Saunders be convinced Matt really believes he killed Sam by error, that the whole department also believes it, and he'll crawl into the open, where we can step on him."

"How long will that take?"

"We don't know. Maybe a long time. Saunders is never careless."

"And what happens when Matt is told the truth and finds out I knew it too? When he learns I let him go on making a wreck out of his life? When he has to endure those memories he has—and Carol Travis, who thinks her husband

was a hero and mine a murderer?"

"That's how it has to be," Morrison said firmly. "It's fine if you want to take Matt in hand and straighten him out. Saunders would expect that. But don't tell Matt. Above all, he must not know because the big lug can't hide his feelings and he'd sure give the show away."

"In other words," Molly said, "you're asking me to risk my marriage with Matt so you can get some dirty-handed drug peddler behind bars."

"So we can save a lot of people from going to the same places you saw today, Molly."

She nodded calmly. "It's worth the risk. You couldn't have sold me without the tour. I'll do my best. But when Matt finds out the truth, there may be a lot of small pieces of Molly Riordan to pick up."

She went to court that afternoon and heard Matt fined $15.00 and given a thirty-day suspended jail sentence, along with a tongue lashing from a self-important minor justice who was trying to make headlines. An ex-detective, he said, couldn't hope for the mercy of the court. Reporters took a few pictures. They showed up on back pages. Matt wasn't important enough for more than that.

Molly took him home and got him to clean up. The stay in jail had drained the whisky out of him. She hadn't seen him so bright-eyed in weeks.

Molly said, "It's like old times, Matt, seeing you this way."

He looked up from the want ads in the newspaper. "I'm over it, I think. Being locked up did it. Now I've got to learn to face people again. Are you with me, Molly?"

"I'm ahead of you," she said. "Edith Leland is giving a party tonight. Just people we both know. She asked us. Will you go?"

He folded the newspaper. "Molly, do you think I can make it?"

"You'll make it," she said. "Everybody knows you didn't try to kill Sam. It would have been no different if he stepped off the curb in front of your car."

"That's what I keep telling myself. All right, Molly. I'll go. If I make a fool of myself, I'll try to face that too."

They walked to the party, only half a dozen blocks away. Edith was one of their old friends and she was delighted to see them, even if she did eye Matt with some surprise. Molly gave Matt's hand a little squeeze, the hollow of his spine a little push toward a group of men, and when he joined them, she followed Edith into the bedroom.

Edith said, "Molly, I'm awfully gald you could make it, but you said over the phone that—well, with Matt and all—"

"Matt's found himself," she said.

"I'm so glad. But Molly, I honestly didn't think you'd come and I

invited Carol Travis. It's going to be awkward. I'll see if I can phone, head her off. I don't care what she thinks. In my opinion, she's a conceited stinker anyway, and I must have been out of my mind to invite her."

In the living room, there were exclamations and someone said, "What a beautiful, beautiful coat. Is it real mink?"

"She's here," Edith sighed. "She told me she had a new coat."

Bought on Sam's crooked money, Molly thought. How was she going to stand watching Carol show off? And when Carol saw Matt—

She heard Carol say, "What's he doing here? I won't stay in the same room with a drunken, brawling murderer! How can you associate with him? They threw him off the force. He killed my husband. He's rotten clear through."

Edith darted for the door. Molly held back, wondering if she could restrain herself. Carol's wail rose higher. "Matt Riordan, take your filthy hands off my coat! Don't come near me!"

A door slammed hard and then there was an embarrassed silence, broken only by Carol's cooing noises as she fondled her full length mink coat. Molly found her own coat and slipped into it. She walked through the living room without a word, passing Carol, not daring to look at her.

Matt was gone and he didn't come home. She sat in her own apartment and broke down for the first time. She had to let Matt go. No matter what he did, how low he felt, she couldn't interfere and whenever the thought came to her that she must, she remembered that sixteen-year-old girl in the morgue, the men and women and kids in the hospital and the cell room.

She'd known all along that, as a cop's wife, she'd have to face things other women might not be able to cope with. Even this.

If Saunders ever suspected! Maybe he had Carol watching Matt, besides those other men who watched him around the clock. Carol would be perfect for Saunders. And perfect for Matt too, Molly realized. After tonight, even a man as doubtful as Saunders ought to be convinced.

Matt had thrown down Carol's mink and rushed out of the place. He kept hearing her voice and he moved faster and faster when he reached the street. The avenue was too far away; the neon signs of the bars were miles off. He'd never make them.

He drank as fast as he could get the stuff in him, but as the first wave of dizziness hit him, he made a phone call. Then he moved from one bar to another, ordering, whiskey by the bottle, drinking it straight and fast until finally he threw a bottle at a backbar mirror and got himself thrown out into a back alley, minus what money he

had left, which would go toward paying for the damage he'd done.

He landed in a pool of fetid water, dumped out the back door of the cafe. He lay there for a little while and then got to his feet and staggered a dozen steps before he fell again. This time he didn't move.

Not even when the two men came out of the shadows and walked to where he lay. One of them dug at his ribs with his shoe. Matt rolled soddenly with the kicks.

The man with the inquisitive shoe, was tall, angular. His companion was a heavier set man, well muscled. The angular one said, "What do you think, Ben?"

"He tied on a real one, the bum."

The angular one rubbed his face. "I wonder what happened at that party? He was stone sober when he went in."

"I'll find out, Toby. Meanwhile, what do we do with him?"

"Drag him to the street while I get a cab."

"You think it's okay, Toby?"

"Stacy wants to see him, doesn't he? To make sure? He said, when this bum tied a real one on, bring him. So we'll bring him."

Ben lifted Matt with one hand, slapped him twenty times across the face, shook him violently and then nodded. "It's safe."

"I just hope he's got some teeth left," Toby said.

They hauled Matt to a waiting car and stuffed him into it. Then

they drove downtown. Matt lay on the floor of the car and Ben kept both his feet on him, pushing hard now and then to see if he could extract a moan. Once he bent down to check, on the assumption Matt might even be dead, but he satisfied himself he wasn't.

"I'll be glad when this is over," he said to Toby who drove. "Trailing a drunk isn't exactly what I call sport. Think Stacy'll have us dunk him in the river?"

"No," Toby said. "We'll just turn him loose. He'll wake up, wonder where he is and how he got there and go find another drink."

"That's good," Ben said. "I'd kind of hate to kill him. When I look at him, I think I'm not so bad!"

In an apartment on the top floor of a very nice building, they put

Matt on a divan. After a little while, the doctor Toby called arrived.

Toby said, "This character is an old friend who hit the skids, too. I'm going to rehabilitate him, if he's not too far gone. Look him over, will you, and tell me what to do?"

The doctor was a fussy little man who didn't like this kind of case, but he could at least examine the drunken wretch breathing laboriously on the divan. He filled a hypo, finally, and injected the contents into Matt's arm. Toby stood very close, watching Matt's face as the needle went in. There wasn't even a tremor.

"This man," the doctor said, "is in a coma induced by alcohol. It's quite clear he's been drinking for a long time. Unless he is helped immediately, he will probably die very soon."

"That stuff you injected," Toby asked. "What was that?"

"Vitamins. A drunk forgets to eat, even if he can afford it. The shot will help, but not much. I'd say he belongs in a sanitarium."

Tobey paid off the doctor, let him out and when he returned to Matt's side, a middle-aged man, grey at the temples and as distinguished looking as a diplomat, came out of another room and went over to stare down at Matt.

"You convinced now, Stacy?" Toby asked.

"Yes, I'm convinced. Make the arrangements. If I stay in this apartment a day longer, I'll go nuts. You know, Toby, this guy used to be a pretty good cop."

"What'll I do with him?"

"Take him back to where you found him. Let him wake up there. I don't want him to suspect a thing. Right now, we're in the clear. I want to keep it that way."

Matt got home shortly before dawn. He was bleary-eyed, had the shakes and his legs were rubbery. He drank the coffee Molly served him.

"Well," he said, "go on and bawl me out. I got it coming."

"Some day," Molly said, "I'll bawl that one out, up there." She pointed at the ceiling. "And she'll be lucky if that's all I do. I'm a happy woman you don't keep a gun around any more—"

Matt slid a .38 across the table. "Don't get any ideas, though. Carol won't be home for a few months, maybe years. Did you ever see such stupidity? Sam left no insurance and she buys a three thousand dollar mink."

"You . . . know, then?" Molly held her breath after the question.

"Sure. I know you let me drink myself half to death and you listened to a rat named Pat Morrison. You let me be insulted and beaten up and humiliated. Sure, I know it all."

"And—Stacy Saunders?"

"Stacy walked into headquarters this morning with his lawyers to give up on a gambling charge. Mor-

rison let me make the pinch. It was pure heaven to see Stacy's face. We got him tied in with Sam, with the drug traffic, and a dozen peddlers who yelled their heads off when Stacy was booked."

"I'll pack my things," Molly said.

"I got wise to it when I saw Carol's coat. I phoned the furrier whose label was in the coat. He happened to owe me a favor, and he told me Carol paid cash. That did it. I played hide and seek with the guys following me and found out they were Stacy's boys, not cops. So I tied one on. I tied on a drunk the likes of which no man should ever endure."

"The details don't matter," Molly said. "I'll go, but I'll stop by Pat Morrison's office and give him a piece of my mind. I'm only glad Saunders is locked up. Pat said it would be worth it, but he's wrong and I'm going to tell him so."

"Wait until tomorrow," Matt said. "I invited him for dinner."

"And I'm to cook it?" Molly asked warily.

"You don't think I can have it catered on a sergeant's pay, even with the back pay I got coming." He lifted her up, put his arms around her. "No cop's wife ever bore the agony you did. I didn't even know myself I was just being used as bait to draw Saunders out. I was the weak one, Molly, and you the strong. That puts me under your thumb the rest of my life, but I deserve it."

"You're not sore, Matt?"

"You did what you had to do, Molly. I'm proud of you. Much prouder than I am of myself, going to pieces the way I did over a bum like Sam Travis. Living right over us and consorting with a man like Saunders, taking his money, being his stool pigeon."

"Blame some of it on Carol," Molly said. "With her greedy ways."

"Still," Matt said, "I noticed the look in your eyes when she flaunted the fur that night. Well, as I said, I've got a lot of back pay coming."

Molly got that look again, not fleeting this time. "I know just the coat, Matt. What good's a stole? A cloth coat, real practical and pretty too."

"On you," Matt said, "it'll look like mink."

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THE MUSIC LOVER

Cunningly, well had he hidden his treasure.
Yet a telltale voice was whispering things . . .

by TONY NOICE

DAVE SHEPHERD locked the small room he shared with another assistant purser and ascended the stairs to the main deck. on the spacious foyer he found his room mate, Jack Melton, and two

seamen waiting for him, He said, "Hi, Jack. What kind of mood was the old man in?"

His friend shook his head. "I never saw him any worse. He's really out for your hide, Dave—said you've proved to be ingenious enough arranging unauthorized vacations for yourself; now he'd like some of that cleverness employed on behalf of the line."

Shepherd nodded. "Yeah, I can see the old boy breathing fire. When does he want me to report?"

"After dinner tonight—*with* the diamonds. He said if you can't locate them by then it will just confirm his impression that your talents would be better employed on a tanker."

Shepherd winced. "That means no more Paris—and no more Lisa. Friend, we've got to find those diamonds." He led the party down the main deck to cabin M-76, one of the most expensive singles on board. Music floated through the doorway. Shepherd knocked. A cultured voice called, "It's open. Come right in."

Harvey Grendal was stretched out on the bed. He wore a maroon silk dressing gown complete with matching ascot. Without rising, he said, "Welcome, gentlemen. I've been expecting you. Searching me on ships has become a ritual of sorts. What are your looking for this time?"

"Diamonds, sir," Shepherd answered, "forty-five of them. The captain thinks someone may have hidden them in here."

"Very tactfully put, young man. Well, proceed." Grendal pointed to the miniature tape recorder on the dressing table. "Does the music bother you?"

"No sir," Shepherd said, "I like Bach." He nodded to Jack and the others to start with the closets and bathroom. He took the dresser. The top drawer contained some toiletries and men's jewelry. The toiletries were all in transparent bottles. The tie clips and cuff links were paper thin. No place to conceal one diamond, say nothing of forty-five.

As he checked the roof of the dresser, Shepherd thought of the dossier he had read on Harvey Grendal. A known smuggler and transporter of hot merchandise, Grendal had never been caught with the evidence on him. He was daring and ruthless—when things got too hot, he always managed to plant the contraband on an associate or even an innocent bystander.

A Cleveland spinster once spent ten hours at London Airport answering questions about the narcotics in her umbrella. She couldn't believe the nice gentleman who helped her off the plane had anything to do with it.

Shepherd grimaced. It was just like the captain to give him an impossible assignment as a test.

Having exhausted all potential

hiding places in the top dresser drawer, Dave started on the second. He felt every inch of the lace-front evening shirts, hand-made ties and silk shorts. Grendal's haberdashery must have cost more than Dave's entire wardrobe. He stopped for a minute to see how the others were doing. No luck. The electric fan had been checked, the trap in the sink, the cakes of soap. They had just started on the bed.

Grendal insisted they search his person as well. He wanted them to be completely satisfied so he wouldn't be annoyed with future visits.

Dave Shepherd went back to work. Another thirty painstaking minutes produced nothing. He shook his head ruefully. If he didn't succeed with this, he was almost sure to be bounced from the luxury liner. Shepherd smiled when he thought of the reason he was in hot water to begin with. Lisa. The long beautiful legs, the creamy skin, the silky auburn hair . . .

He had met her on board the year before and whenever the ship docked at Le Havre, he grabbed the *train rapide* to Paris and renewed the acquaintance.

It was strictly against regulations; all officers were to remain on duty until the terminal port, Southampton. But trips to Paris were standard among the junior officers: you just got a buddy to cover for you and turn in your reports. Only you had to be back when the ship returned to Le Havre the following morning at eight. Fire-and-boat drill, with roll call, went off promptly at eight-thirty.

Shepherd had tried to explain that to the railroad workers at the Gare St. Lazare, Paris, but they had gone on strike anyway. So when he arrived one hour late in a rented car, the captain welcomed him aboard personally. Now his only chance to avoid a transfer was to get something on Grendal, who had been a barnacle on the captain's hull for years.

But as the search proceeded, Shepherd's hopes receeded. An hour's effort had produced only sore backs and scraped fingers. One item remained: the tape recorder. Dave motioned to the other purser.

"Jack, you're the hi-fi buff. How do we check out this recorder?"

Melton looked at the set. He said, "This is a Minex. It's about the finest subminiature made. Kind of like a watch inside, Dave. Every inch of space is utilized. The fact that it's playing perfectly pretty much guarantees that it hasn't been tampered with. Still, we might as well take a look."

He glanced over at the amused Mr. Grendal. "How about it, sir?"

"Certainly. Do you know how to open it up or would you care to have me do it?"

"Oh, I'm sure I can manage, sir."

"Good. And when you're through, please change the reel for the Beethoven over there."

Melton turned the set off, unplugged it from the wall socket and removed the top cover. He pointed to the two five-inch reels snugly spindled on the ten-and-a-quarter-inch tape deck. Shepherd said wryly, "I see what you mean about compactness."

Melton carefully removed the tapes, then unscrewed the back plate, exposing a mass of wires and transistors. He took out the batteries and poked a small flashlight into the unit's innards. He shook his head. "Sorry, Dave, there's nothing wrong with it."

After reassembling the unit and plugging it back into the wall socket, he changed the tapes as Grendal had requested. The search party made its exit to the victory theme of the Beethoven Fifth.

Shepherd stationed a seaman outside the cabin to make sure no packages were brought in or out.

As they walked to the ward room for dinner, Melton said, "Maybe the French police made a mistake and he doesn't have the stuff on him."

"I doubt it," Shepherd answered glumly. "The thing that bothers me is that he was so damned cooperative. He even offered to take the recorder apart himself. I don't know. It's as if the stage were set and he wanted us to search thoroughly. Well, he's a first class passenger. We can't keep him bottled up the whole trip. And if he manages to pass the stuff to some confederate on board, we've had it."

The two friends entered the ward room in silence. After coffee, Shepherd asked, "What time did the old man say he wanted to see me?"

"Late. Ten o'clock. He'll have an extra long dinner tonight to charm the V.I.P.s at his table."

"Yeah, then my head will be served in his quarters for dessert."

They returned to their room. Shepherd laid on his bunk—might as well rest before the execution. He smiled at Melton and said, "I'm going to both envy and miss you, pal, while I'm slaving away on the tanker."

His friend shook his head. "You can skip the envy. Without you to get me out of scrapes, I'll be joining the oil brigade soon enough. Let's face it, if it weren't for your coaching, I wouldn't even have got a commission."

"Well, thanks for the testimonial, but I'm afraid I've met my match in Mr. Grendal."

Melton, who was rummaging in his foot locker, glanced up. "He's a cool one all right. And he sure knows how to live. I'd give a month's pay to own one of those Minex tape recorders. Unfortunately, they cost three month's pay."

He continued to search his locker. Finally he came up with an

advertising brochure. "I knew I had saved one of these." He handed it to Shepherd.

Dave Shepherd opened the leaflet and glanced through it.

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Shepherd suddenly sat upright. He broke into a grin. "Jack, let's visit Mr. Grendal again; I want another concert."

* * *

An hour later in the captain's quarters, Dave Shepherd neatly placed forty-five diamonds on his boss's desk.

He said, "You see sir, Grendal wanted us to check the recorder after hearing it play. He figured if we knew electronics, we'd realize the set couldn't have been tampered with and play perfectly, and if we didn't happen to know electronics, we could use our eyes and ears all day and discover nothing wrong.

"It was only later that I found out the set is designed to play on batteries *or* house current. Since he was plugged into our current, that left six batteries for storing diamonds."

READ: In the April issue of MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE:

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HOOKED

by STEVE APRIL

It was a short job and the pay was good. All I had to do was—knock out a champ!

I WAS working the eight to four tour and as I left the ancient precinct house a man called out, "Mr. Al Pudeska?"

Turning, I saw this stout little man with heavy glasses and a wispy gray mustache on a tired face, behind the wheel of a parked Dodge. "What do you want?" I asked, certain I wasn't behind on any of my installments.

"Dave Mason of the *Evening Times.* If you can spare a few minutes, I'd like to talk to you."

There was a Dave Mason who was the sports editor of the *Evening Times,* I read his column every day.

"Talk to me? What about?"

He opened the door of the old Dodge. "About boxing and things."

Puzzled, I slid onto the seat beside him. It had been four years since I'd lost the Olympic middleweight finals to a slow but hard

punching Greek. Nobody had interviewed me then and I certainly wasn't newsworthy now.

Driving toward the Hudson River, Mason asked, "How do you like being a cop, Mr. Pudeska?"

"It's okay, a job. Are you doing a piece on pugs who became police officers?"

"No. But this concerns both the ring and police work. Mr. Pudeska —Al, whether you agree to a little moonlighting job or not, can I have your word our talk will be strictly confidential?"

"Moonlighting? Mason, I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"It's a personal matter," he said softly, "and there's a thousand bucks for a few hours work. Are you interested?"

"You've the wrong guy. I'm a policeman, not a private badge," I said as two thoughts raced around in my mind: a thousand would pay for my car and judging by his clothes, the old Dodge, Mason didn't seem able to afford ten bucks.

We drove in silence for a moment, then he parked on the Drive, the afternoon sun strong over New Jersey. I said, "You're in a no parking zone."

He nodded. "I think my press card and your badge can avoid any tickets. Al, this job isn't shady and you won't be risking your police job, but I must have your word that our talk is off the record."

"Okay." I was more curious than anything else.

"You look in shape. Doing any boxing?"

"I spar at the police gym once a week."

"I remember you because I'm always fascinated by amateurs wise enough to keep out of the pro racket. Or didn't you get any offers?"

"A couple of two-bit managers were after me, but the pro game is dead. Anyway, I wasn't a big deal, didn't win a gold medal. Frankly, I got into boxing by a fluke. I had a football scholarship but was too light for the team. Well, to stay in college, I tried the boxing team. In the amateurs any guy with a little brains and speed can make out.

"I won the intercollegiate title and then made the Oympic squad. It was a nice way to see Europe, but I lost so much time I had to drop out of college. Now I'm a cop. The story of my life, if that's what you want."

"Tell me, what do you think of Floyd Jones, Al?"

"Say, you did a book on him when he became the youngest middleweight champ in ring history. I read it, Mr. Mason, and you did a fine job, showed him as a sensitive but insecure type, with great pride."

"Thank you. Floyd suffers from too much pride and dignity."

"What's with him? He once said

he'd retire by the time he was thirty. Now he's thirty, been champion three times, made a pile, yet he's still fighting, even though he's lost his speed and punch. He stopped old Steve Cox last week and according to the papers, he's asking to fight the champ again."

"Floyd hasn't signed yet, but the match is in the works."

"It doesn't make sense. The champ has flattened Floyd twice now, I doubt if Floyd could beat the champ with a baseball bat. If he has money, what's the point in his taking a pasting?"

"It's a tragedy. I suppose you've also read that Floyd's wife left him, because he won't retire?"

I nodded. "He was in the ring so much. I don't see how he had the time to spend his millions. Is he broke?"

"Floyd hasn't all the money he should have; he was pieced up by the fight mob. But he has over a hundred thousand in solid stocks and some real estate. It's about Floyd that I want to talk to you, both as a cop and as a fighter."

"Oh?" I said.

"Al, let me first give you the real picture of Floyd Jones, a Negro kid from the worst slums, broken home, the whole bit. At fifteen Floyd was a bitter, confused kid. The first new clothes he ever had were given to him in a reform school. He also started boxing there, found a path out of the bleak, rootless life he'd been living. When he won the Golden Gloves, for the first time in his life he was a somebody. Unfortunately, in those days and to a lesser extent now, the racket punks ran the fight game."

"But wasn't Floyd's manager, this Danny Jenovese, the one who exposed all that? He wouldn't let Floyd fight any pugs controlled by the mob."

Mason smiled sadly. "A lot of herring. Danny merely fronted for a new mob trying to muscle in. The racket angle has gone now, mostly because there isn't any real money in pro fighting today, except for the champs. To be fair, Danny did give Floyd all the breaks the racket allowed. He brought him along carefully, picking his spots, made him champion at the age of eighteen, even secured the court order which protected Floyd's cut, as a minor, from the chislers.

"I guess you remember the publicity; they were like father and son. That was almost true. Floyd was the first and only champ Danny ever had. But Jenovese is hooked with the mob, can't get out. Despite advising Floyd to invest wisely, Danny himself is a throwback to the old fight managers, tossed his money away. As for Floyd's wife, Gloria, she's had a miserable life, with Floyd always away in a training camp, here or abroad. His three kids barely know him.

"Gloria looked forward to the time when he'd retire and they could enjoy their nice home, their money. She's a sweet girl and very much in love with Floyd. I'll let you in on another secret; for the past three years Floyd's had a slipped disc in his back. Most of his bouts have been an ordeal of pain for him."

"Is that why the present champ flattened him twice?"

Mason shook his head. "At his best Floyd couldn't have licked the champ. Floyd was a good fighter, the champ's a great one, on a par with Sugar Ray."

"Then why is Floyd seeking another fight with the champ?"

"Because of his inner pride and because, due to the fight game being dead, there aren't any real opponents for the champ. A third fight between Floyd and the champ should gross a few hundred grand and the mob wants that loot. Floyd isn't hungry but they are!"

"Mason, are you telling me the racket guys are forcing Floyd to fight?"

"Al, 'force' can mean many things beside violence. Floyd wants to retire. He knows that another beating by the champ can cripple him for life, even leave him punchy. But Danny has threatened to reveal that most of Floyd's early fights were tank jobs. And they probably were. But Floyd's pride won't allow him to believe that, or to ever let it be known. So he's trapped by his own image. As one of his few friends, I want the bout with the champ stopped."

"Why don't you put what you've told me in your column, Mr. Mason?"

"Al, while I know this to be the truth, I don't have any actual proof. My paper would be sued for libel. And Floyd wouldn't want me to even hint that some of his early fights were phony. All those stories about his wanting to help kids, when he was the champ, his talks at various reform schools, raising money for them, all that was on the level. Floyd's finished as a pug, has nothing left but his own image, his belief in himself. Floyd would die before he'd shatter that."

"Where do I come in? Do you expect me to track down and arrest a mob of hoods, single-handed?"

Mason sighed. "Stop talking like something off a TV screen. I've been thinking about this like crazy and we've come up with an out. The title bout hasn't been signed yet because the promoters aren't positive Floyd is still a big attraction. They want to beat the publicity drums more. Championship fights are big business and a big overhead. Despite the public having a kind of sentimental attachment for clean-living Floyd, the fact remains that the champ twice has kayoed Floyd. You can help us and make a quiet thousand dollars. Plus, as a cop, you'll also be frustrating these old mobsters."

"You've lost me again."

"It's a simple plan. Al, you were an amateur champ. Tomorrow you show up at the gym, ask to spare with the famous ex-champ, Floyd Jones. You'll knock him down—Floyd will take a dive. You'll spar with him again the next day and this time the press will be there, intrigued by the idea of a relatively unknown amateur flooring the ex-champ. This time you'll knock Floyd down three times.

"The reporters write their sentimental slop about a fine fighter, a credit to the game, etc. etc. being washed up and the promoters won't touch Floyd with a ten-foot pole. There's nothing the mob can do, Floyd is no longer of any value to them. Floyd can finally retire, make up with Gloria, a happy ending for a nice guy. You'll get some short-lived publicity and probably offers to turn pro, which, of course I'd advise you to forget. You're not only twenty-four, but never forget the knockdowns will be fakes. But a thousand dollars for about two hours work is easy money."

"Floyd paying the grand?"

"Of course. It was hard to convince him, the idea of an amateur flooring him, but he understands it's his one out, the only way he can save his marriage and his health."

"Why me? Why not hire a pro?"

"There isn't a pro I can trust, or who might not have some connection with the fight mob. It would hurt Floyd's pride to be decked by a third-rate pro. But you're an unknown, an Olympic amateur; you'll vanish from the fight scene. Also, in a vague way, you'll be working as a cop, preventing a fraud. Interested?"

"I don't know. When do I get the money?"

"Now. We'll drive to Floyd's house. He's there alone, Gloria and the kids are at her mother's. He has a ring in his basement and you two can rehearse for tomorrow. Nothing to it, really, Floyd will lower his right and you hit him with a left hook. You're enough of a boxer to pull a punch and down Floyd goes."

Mason took an envelope from his pocket. It held a thin pile of

$50 bills: it also held a paid up car, new clothes, a little cushion while I finished night college.

I took it.

Floyd Jones lived in a new split level ranch house on the Island, everything neat and the furniture all contempory stuff. Floyd, to my surprise had an unmarked, brown face, with only traces of scar-tissue over his soft eyes. He said, "You understand, man, no word of this must ever get out? It would ruin my rep and I guess it wouldn't do you any good."

"I understand."

"Let's go downstairs. All you got to do is hit me, make it look good, I do the rest."

He had a regulation ring in his large basement and we got into trunks, shoes and headguards. Floyd was in great shape, all muscle. We put on the big gloves and Mason rang the bell. We sparred for a moment and I was tight and stiff, in awe of being in the same ring with Floyd Jones.

But Floyd grunted, "You do fine, man; you got fast hands," and that made me relax.

Actually, he didn't seem much on the finer points of boxing, I had no trouble hitting him with my jab, moving away from him. Then he said, "Now," and dropped his right glove a little. I sent over a light left hook to his chin. Floyd sat down hard, shook his head, mouth slack, eyes rolling.

Mason yelled, "That was great."

Grinning, Floyd jumped to his feet and patted me on the back. I said, "Mr. Jones, you should become an actor."

"Why? Is there a shortage of colored actors? I'm going to do nothing for a year or so, maybe travel with my wife and kids. Then, maybe I go into real estate, something like that. Let's try it again, Al."

We did the act a couple of times, Floyd showing me how to get my shoulder behind the hook, so it looked better. We took a shower and dressed, agreed to meet in a Bronx gym at four-thirty the next day. Like in a spy movie, Mason waited until the street was empty, rushed me to his car.

Once in my room, I counted the $1000 like a miser, happily wondered at the soft touch I'd walked into. My only problem was where to keep the money. I've a savings account but it might look suspicious for a cop to deposit a thousand bucks at one time. My silver medal was on the wall, framed, and I taped the envelope to the back of the frame. I'd be off by Friday, could take my time going around and opening a couple of new accounts.

The next day I had my gym stuff in the trunk of my car and when I finished my tour, I rushed up to this Bronx gym. It was an old, rundown loft, stinking of stale sweat and liniment.

There were a few pros and a lot of

young kids working out as I rented a locker. I didn't see anybody looking like Danny Jenovese around. Mason was sitting at ringside and of course I didn't even look his way. Floyd had finished punching the bags, was sitting behind the ring with an old robe around his sweating body, a towel on his head, watching some awkward kids up in the ring.

I limbered up, bandaged my hands, worked on the speed bag. Then I went over to Floyd, casually asked if he wanted to go a few rounds.

Floyd was some actor. He merely looked up at me, asked, "Who you? I never seen you around before, man."

"Just an amateur. I reached the Olympic finals. I'm just working out to keep in shape. We'll take it easy."

"Okay," Floyd said, getting to his feet. "You a brave amateur."

Things went smoothly. After about a minute of easy sparring, Floyd dropped his right glove, my left hook landed on his chin and he was stretched out on the dirty canvas. The gym was in a mild uproar as Floyd staggered to his feet, said he'd had it for the day, added, "Tomorrow, we spar again. Okay, man?"

"Sure, Mr. Jones."

I shadow-boxed for awhile, all the kids staring at me. Then Mason came over and pretended to interview me. I took a shower and had supper, too restless to even see my girl.

In the morning I was a sensation at the precinct house. Mason had a column about me. My platoon sargent asked, "Pudeska, you thinking of turning pro?"

"No. I was just getting some exercise."

When I reached the gym that afternoon it was crowded with a dozen reporters and a lot of older men, most of them in worn but flashy clothes—fight managers. As I worked out on the heavy bag, the newsmen watched me and so did a short, silver-haired man with what had been a baby-face—once. When I got into the ring again with Floyd, this guy was rubbing vaseline on Floyd's brown face, so I knew he was Danny Jenovese. In the Police Academy they'd told us mobsters rarely looked like Edward G. Robinson. Jenovese looked like a small storekeeper.

Floyd was putting on a show for the reporters. He waved at me and said loudly, "You sure an amateur, coming back here. But don't worry. I can't kill you with these heavy gloves. Let's go."

Jenovese slipped a mouthpiece between Floyd's lips and rang the bell. We danced around and then my left touched his chin and Floyd went to one knee. I glanced at Jenovese, wondering if he could tell I'd pulled the punch. He rang the bell, cutting the round short.

"Are you hurt, Floyd?" he asked.

Floyd had jumped to his feet. "Hurt? I slipped, Danny. Let's go."

Jenovese rang the bell. We mixed it up and my left hit his chin and Floyd fell against the ropes, slid to the canvas. He did it well.

Danny jumped into the ring, pulled Floyd up. Pretending he was groggy, Floyd insisted he wanted to continue sparring, even glared across the ring at me. Danny said he ought to knock off for the day.

I walked around the ring, throwing punches at the air, listening to the reporters talking. A photographer on the ring apron nearly blinded me with his flash.

Floyd pushed Danny out of the ring, motioned for him to ring the bell. The third knockdown was to take longer. He slipped my left jabs and we did a lot of infighting. He was good at it, banging my gut with short rights. Heavy gloves and all, they were a reminder of his punching power. I was puffing, a little tired. We clinched and wrestled, I guess he was giving me a chance to get my wind back. He said loudly, "You pretty good for an amateur. You also pretty lucky, man."

The reporters grinned.

Floyd added, "I hear you a cop. Got your blackjack in your left glove?"

The reporters laughed. I wondered why all the loud talk. We were still wrestling and Danny called out, "Move around, Floyd."

He let go of me and we boxed and then he tied me up again. Amazing how he could move so fast, with his bad back. This time he whispered, "Man, we change script a little. I knock you down once."

I pushed him away, not sure I could fake a fall. And if things hit the fan, good-bye to my police job. I danced around him, my legs starting to feel heavy. He bulled me into a clinch and whispered, "You go down once and then I take the dive. Look better for me."

I shook my head and he pounded my stomach with those short punches, said loudly, "Hey amateur, you don't like it downstairs."

When I tried to keep my hands over my gut, he pounded my kidneys, said loudly, "There's more to fighting than a lucky punch."

The reporters cackled. I grabbed Floyd's arms, glanced over his shoulder at Mason. He merely stared up at me.

We broke and I landed a light left on his jaw. Floyd didn't fall. Now there was a sullen look in his eyes and I suddenly knew he was going to floor me and no acting! A hard jab on my nose told me he wasn't kidding.

I didn't know how to tell him I was afraid to take a dive, that it could louse up everything, and I was puffing too hard to whisper

to him. I also knew I wasn't going to stand still for a real punch from a pro.

I danced out of range and my legs were going. He motioned with his gloves, said loudly, "You an amateur dancer, too?"

I glanced at Jenovese, certain the round was over-long, but he was merely leaning over the ropes, a cruel smile on his odd face. Floyd fell back against the ropes, bounced off to expertly smother me in a clinch, whispering, "Go down, once, man, for the sake of my rep. Go down or I drop you!"

I shook my head, panting. He put another short right into my gut, more of a slap, grunted, "Now, man!" and stepped back, waiting for me to fall. But I've never been on the floor. I'm not an actor, nor could I chance making things look like the fake they were.

Floyd's right dropped and I crossed a light left hook. The side of my head, guard and all, seemed to explode. I'd been suckered into his smashing right hook!

Dizzy, full of panic, I feinted with my feet and blocked another right, which numbed my arm. I knew I was too bushed to last more than a moment or two. I feinted with my feet again and as Floyd started the right, I rifled my left hook across to his exposed jaw, all I had left behind the punch.

Floyd's eyes turned glassy as he pitched face forward.

There was a lot of noise: Jenovese banging the damn bell, everybody talking. I heard somebody yell, "How about that, with heavy gloves, too!"

I stood there, staring down at Floyd, out cold on the canvas, legs really twitching. All I felt was a shocked surprise: I'd always been a fancy boxer, never knew I packed a kayo wallop before.

Danny dragged Floyd to a stool, put smelling salts under his nose. Floyd started to come out of it.

Jumping out of the ring, I held out my gloves for a kid to untie. Taking my headguard off, I started for the showers, reporters surrounding me, all shouting, asking if I was turning pro. I kept saying no, no, as I pushed through them.

The hell with a shower. I wanted to get out of the place. I went directly to my locker, put my pants and shirt on over my sweaty ring togs, the feel of the gun in my hip pocket somehow very reassuring.

Packing my bag, I came out of the locker room to face the newsmen again. I kept telling them, over and over, that I had no plans for turning pro, that I liked being a cop.

Floyd was sitting on a rubbing table, still looking a trifle groggy, but okay.

Danny Jenovese grabbed my free arm. "Son, I have to talk to you."

"You don't have to do a damn thing for me but get out of my way!" I snapped, pushing him

aside, bulling my way towards the door, sweating like a pig.

"I can get you some real paydays, son. Let's talk this over."

"Jenovese, any talking I'll ever have with you will be as a cop!" Reaching the door, I ran down the old steps, the cool afternoon air a welcome lift. Mason was waiting by my car, his face pale. He said, "You fink! You Sunday punched him!"

"The hell I did, Floyd was out to floor me, for the sake of his rep, his precious, stupid image! He nearly made a mess of everything. Well, you got what you paid for, Mason, Floyd's washed up as a boxer."

"He was taking it easy with you. You didn't have to flatten him."

"The hell with his silly pride! Okay, Mason. Try to understand this and explain it to Floyd. In the ring he asked me to take a fall, to go down just once, for the sake of his rep. But I don't know how to fake a fall, was afraid I'd look so phony it might expose everything. I couldn't explain that to him when we were in the ring, but you tell him I was also afraid to stand still for the great Floyd Jones to swing on me, so I got lucky. I guess that should console his fancy pride. So long, Mason."

Unlocking my car, I drove off, heading for my room and a shower.

I wasn't thinking about Floyd Jones' image but of my own. I was suddenly and sharply aware I had one, now. I felt both high and uneasy. Boxing had never been anything to me but a hobby, until today.

Sure, it was too late; I was too old. But four years ago, with this mighty punch I never even knew I had, if I had taken one of the crummy pro offers, would I be a champ this minute, with a hundred grand in stocks? Sure, the racket was dying, but as Mason had said, the champs still made big money.

I was almost sorry I'd gotten into all this; the money, the thousand, wasn't worth the doubt I'd be forced to live with from now on; my image. I was a happy and contented joker up to now, only looking ahead to taking the sergeant's exam and not too concerned about that.

But could I ever be contented with being a cop now, with any ordinary job? I mean, damn it, I had kayoed Floyd Jones! How can I ever forget that?

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The Voice of a Child

A man can't kill himself, then get up and do murder? That's what you think! But a little boy thought different . . .

by
STUART M. KAMINSKY

THE CHUBBY, yellow-haired boy, his thick glasses perched on the end of his nose, sat quietly in the corner with his legs dangling several inches from the floor. His head titlted forward toward the open book on his lap and he seemed to pay no attention to the two men sputtering on the other side of the room about murder and suicide and the like.

The boy's only observable reaction to the adults was an occassional grimace against Doctor Fairbanks's billowing cigar smoke that

threatened to engulf the chief of police's office in a grey cloud.

"It can't be, Doc," said Chief Witt with a sigh as he spotted the boy's crinkled nose and rose to open a window. "It just can not be, I tell you.

In the full-length mirror on the door beyond the desk, Witt saw himself as the doctor must have seen him, a neat, good looking uniformed man in his early forty's with greying hair and a perplexed look on his face as he scratched his head.

"How," Witt said glumly, "can a dead man commit murder by stabbing another man? It just can't be, Doc."

He threw open the window and a haze of smoke drifted out. The white-haired, white-mustached little man seated on the other side of the desk expelled a huge grey puff as if to help fill the vacancy left by the retreating smoke.

"You wanted a medical opinion, Leonard," the man said, brushing grey ash from his sleeve. "When you ask my opinion, you will get it. It is also my opinion, contrary to prevailing belief in this community, that use of television and radio does not contaminate the air, one need not lie on his right side when sleeping to keep from interfering with the heart, there is no medicine that can be taken by mouth to disolve gallstones, a cold cannot be broken up, daily bowel movements are not necessary for health . . ."

"Doc," said Witt, sinking back into his swivel chair.

"Well, my opinion on such matters is good enough for you while you question my judgment on the subject about which I know most, death and its causes. As chief pathologist for Delft-Highwood County, I resent your insinuation. I especially resent it in view of the fact that the job is without salary and I have held it for twenty-five of the most frustrating years of my prolonged existence." The old man smoothed his mustache and chuckled.

"Im not amused," said Witt, restraining his hand, which sought to scratch his nervously itching scalp again.

"Go ahead and scratch," said the doctor, pointing to Chief Witt's head with the glowing cigar. "It might do you some good—get the blood flowing, induce internal secretions to the brain and give you some answers."

Len Witt lifted a stapled and typed report. "Doc, I've got a witness, two witnesses. It's nice and simple, or it was until you complicated it. Are you sure?"

"Len, do you know that tomato juice causes heart disease?"

"Doc, I—"

"Well it doesn't. And ice water won't cause heart trouble either, watermelon won't cause polio, cooked cereals do not heat the blood, grape juice and dried poke berries are useless for treating

arthritis, and parsnips do not cleanse the kidneys."

"All right Doc. You're sure, but —"

"My grandfather says alfalfa tea cures rheumatism," said the little boy in the corner without looking up from his book.

"See," said Doc Fairbanks twisting in his chair to look at the boy. "Everybody in Delftwood thinks he's a doctor and your sergeant is the worst offender. If Breedlove continues to practice medicine without a license, I will personally retaliate by making citizens arrests on all the clods in this town who spit on the sidewalk."

"I'll talk to him Doc. But please," Witt pleaded, "I've got two reporters out at the front desk waiting for a statement. Now let's get this straight. The boy was right there all the time. He was sitting in Professor Dockstader's living room with the professor's niece last night when it happened. Foreman came in, went to the professor's room right off the hall, stepped in, stabbed him, and then went out in his car and shot himself. Foreman couldn't have killed himself before he killed the professor."

The old doctor snapped his head around to the chief who, startled by the sudden movement, dropped the report on the desk.

"Thanks to the presence of mind of that young man and the speed with which he got to a telephone, both you and I were at Dockstader's home within fifteen minutes. I examined both bodies then, and I have just spent the night working on both of them. I tell you, in lay terms, that Dockstader died within seconds after being stabbed directly in the heart. The blade pierced the aorta.

"Allowing for fibrillation and the fact that his heart was weak in any case, I tell you he died after Foreman. Crudely stated, Foreman died of a bullet in the brain. Suffice it to say that judging from body temperature, in spite of the unseasonably cold weather, plus pupil contraction and a number of other factors, I can affirm that Foreman was dead at least ten minutes before the professor."

"But how—do you have a few minutes, Doc?"

"No, but I'll take them."

Witt picked up the phone on his desk, pressed a button and said, "Come in here, please, with your notes."

Almost instantly Sergeant Breedlove, a huge, overweight yet powerful looking man in a rumpled police uniform, lumbered in. His freckled, bald head was tanned as was his face over a crumpled, open tie. He looked a decade younger than his sixty years.

"Breedlove," rasped Doc Fairbanks, "you've been filling that boy's head with some more foolishness."

"Please," said Witt, standing with hands apart and palms out as

if to restrain the tiny doctor from attacking the gigantic sergeant.

The doctor made a sour face and Breedlove, paying no attention, patted his grandson on the head and eased his bulk into an oversize chair in the corner.

"Sergeant," Witt said, pouring a glass of water into a paper cup from a dusty pitcher on the desk, "will you tell us what you found?"

Doc Fairbanks shot a cloud of smoke toward the sergeant and held his cigar as if it were a dart.

"Well," said Breedlove, flipping through a battered notebook, "it seems Professor Dockstader and Harv Foreman have been at each other for years, or so says the professor's niece, Lucy. Foreman wanted to marry Lucy a few years back, but Dockstader cut it all off, said he didn't want a sick, ignorant, money-grabbing janitor in the family."

"We all know that," grumbled the tiny doctor. "Town's been kicking that around for years. Dockstader was no prize of a man, but you know and so does everyone else around here that Foreman was after the girl's money. Just look at her."

"What's wrong with Lucy?" came the voice of the boy in the corner.

"Nothing," Doc Fairbanks sighed. "She's a fine woman, fine woman. I hope he left her a pile of money after all those years of looking after that old grouch. But it was a waste of effort if Foreman did it. Dockstader couldn't have lasted much longer."

"Professor Dockstader was sick?" asked Witt.

"Cancer. Now that he's dead I don't see any reason for secrecy. Doctor Griggs has operated on him several times in the last few years. Well, go on, Sergeant, I've got to get some sleep before office hours," Fairbanks grumbled.

"Anyway," Breedlove continued, "murder threats have been going both ways for months, especially since Foreman has been trying to see Lucy and Lucy has started to think about accepting Foreman in spite of the professor. Then yesterday the professor tells Lucy that Foreman is coming over to settle things and that she is to just sit quietly in the living room till it's all worked out. Well Pete, my grandson—"

"We know he's your grandson," mumbled the doctor.

"Pete gets along fine with Lucy and he was over at the professor's in the living room with her having cake when, sure enough, at about nine Foreman comes through the front door, and steps right into the professor's room before Pete or Lucy can even stand up. Right away the professor lets out a scream."

"He yelled 'put that knife down!' " said Pete Breedlove from the corner.

"So Pete and Lucy got up, but before they could even move Foreman

is in the hall, locking the professor's door and running out the front door. Pete and Lucy tried to open the professor's door but it was locked, so they ran outside to get in through the window, but it was locked from the inside and the curtains were drawn.

"They broke the window, climbed in and found the professor dead with the knife in his stomach. We live just a few doors down, so Pete came and got me and called into headquarters while I ran over."

"Boy has more sense than a lot of adults," said the doctor, examining his cigar.

"The professor was dead all right and we found Foreman in his car around the corner right away as soon as we looked. His car was locked from the inside and we had to break a window to get in. The gun was in his hand and he was dead. Then Lucy fainted and by the time I got her back in the house you two were both there."

"There," exclaimed Chief Witt slapping down on his desk. "You see, Doc? How could Foreman be dead first when you tell me both of them died almost instantly and I have witnesses who saw Foreman commit the murder?"

"One of your witnesses is in no condition to give sensible testimony," said the doctor standing, "and the other is a boy. Did you know that punctures from rusty nails are no more dangerous than those from clean, shiny nails?"

"No I didn't, Doc," said Breedlove in obvious awe.

"Well it's true. You accept it when I tell the both of you but when it comes to pathology, you suddenly know more medicine than I do."

"Now look here, Doc," said Witt, standing and leaning toward the little man, who glared at him defiantly. "Somebody's wrong."

"Bollo," the boy whispered.

"Not now, Pete," the bulky sergeant said.

"But I've got to get back to school and I've been sitting here almost an hour."

"Let the boy go," said Doc Fairbanks.

"But Chief," the boy said, "if you just will let me ask a few ques-

tions, I think I know what happened."

"Why not?" said Witt, crunching his empty water cup and throwing it into his waste basket as he sat in his swivel chair and folded his arms. A few minutes of childish babble might calm some jumpy nerves.

"Okay," the boy said, examining some notes he had been taking in a black spelling book. "First, were there any fingerprints on the knife?"

"No," replied Breedlove. "We figured Foreman wore gloves."

"Was Foreman wearing gloves when you found him, Bollo?" continued the boy, chewing on a yellow pencil.

"No, but there was a pair in the car. We figure he took them off to hold the gun."

"What are you getting at, Pete?" said Witt, suddenly attentive.

"Let the boy go on," Doc Fairbanks said through teeth clenched tightly on a dwindling cigar. "He seems to be the only one around here besides me doing any thinking."

"Some things seem mighty funny to me," said Pete. "Like why did Mr. Foreman stab the professor? Why didn't he just shoot him? He had a gun."

"Too much noise," Witt said.

"But Lucy and I were there. We saw him go in and out. Noise wouldn't made any difference."

"He was crazy," Witt said. "He didn't think. Maybe he didn't mean to stab the professor. Then when he did it he went out in the car and shot himself."

"No such thing!" the doctor bellowed. "Foreman died first."

"Why last night?" said the boy.

"What do you mean?" asked Witt.

"I've been thinking," Pete continued. "There was something funny about last night. First off—"

"Don't say 'first off', Pete. Just say 'first'," Sergeant Breedlove corrected.

Doc Fairbanks glared at the sergeant and Len Witt slumped back with his hand to his forehead.

"First, last night was the first cold spell we've had this year—which might not mean anything, but it might," said Pete, ticking off a note in his book with the pencil. "Second, last night was the first time Professor Dockstader didn't complain about me being around. He didn't like kids. Usually Lucy comes over to our house to visit. Right, Bollo?"

"That's true," Breedlove agreed.

"He was afraid of Foreman and wanted someone else around for protection," Witt ventured.

"I'm just a kid. If he wanted protection, he would have asked Bollo to come. He wanted Lucy and me sitting in the living room, where we could see the door but not do anything."

"What's your point, Pete?" asked Witt.

"Don't you see?" wailed Doc Fairbanks, squinting at the boy with admiration. "He may be wrong, but he's got imagination."

"See what?" Witt and Breedlove said in unison.

"Professor Dockstader killed Mr. Foreman and then committed suicide, not the other way around," the boy said.

"Certainly would account for the fact that Foreman died first," said the doctor.

"Can't be," Breedlove said, tapping his black notebook. "You and Lucy saw Foreman come in, heard the professor scream, saw Foreman leave. The professor's room was locked from the outside by Foreman and we found the key in his pocket. The windows in the professor's room were latched from the inside. Besides, we found Foreman dead in his locked car."

"A hodge-podge of data," said the old doctor throwing the remains of his cigar in a waste basket and reaching for another one, "but valid points to contend with. Can you contend, boy?"

Pete's lips formed a pout. "I think so. If the professor did it, he picked last night for a reason and that reason was that it was cold. Lucy said she saw Foreman come in and I don't see so good—"

"So well," Breedlove corrected.

"Sergeant, if you interrupt that boy once more—" Doc Fairbanks threatened.

"I don't see so well, but all I could tell was that a man in an overcoat and hat came in fast and was in the professor's room almost before I could look up. He was partly turned away too. The professor had told Lucy that Foreman was coming at nine. So, when someone came in at the right time, wearing a coat and hat just like Foreman's, Lucy thought it was Foreman. She couldn't see his face clearly with the hat down and the collar up."

"If it wasn't Foreman, who was it?" asked Witt.

"Professor Dockstader, of course," Doc Fairbanks snorted. "They were about the same height and weight, but a coat and slouch would make up the difference."

"Right," Pete said. "He waited for the first cold night so he could wear a coat and hat just like Foreman's. He came in, stepped into his own room, yelled so Lucy and I could hear him and think he had been stabbed. Then he comes out with his back to us, locks the door and is out of the house before Lucy and I can get across the room. It all happened fast and that's what he wanted. The thing that got me thinking was why, if Foreman did it, did he lock the professor's room?"

"I don't know," said the perplexed Witt, reaching in his desk for a bottle of aspirin.

"Because the room was empty," the doctor said triumphantly. "Dockstader didn't want Lucy and

the boy to get over there, open the door and find no body."

"Right," said the serious Pete Breedlove. "The professor had left the window open. He ran around the house quick, climbed through the window, locked it and stabbed himself before Lucy and I could get in. So, the suicide looked like murder."

"But why?" sputtered Witt.

"Simple," said the gleeful Fairbanks, stroking his mustache. "I told you Dockstader was sick. He didn't have long to go, so he decided to get rid of Foreman, knowing that after he was gone Foreman would be sure to marry Lucy and get his money. I don't know if he was more bothered by the prospect of Foreman getting his money or marrying Lucy, but he found a way to get rid of Foreman and go out as a poor, sympathetic murder victim."

"The way I figure it," said the boy, pushing his slipping glasses back on his nose, "Professor Dockstader called Foreman and told him to park around the corner at about a quarter to nine, where they could talk things over without Lucy knowing. The professor climbed out of his window, met Foreman in the car and when he saw he was wearing the right coat and hat, he climbed into the car, shot him, left the gun, locked the car after dropping a duplicate key to his room in Foreman's pocket.

"Then, wearing a coat and hat he had bought just like Foreman's, he went back through the front door, where Lucy and I thought he was Foreman."

"Fantastic," Witt's hoarse voice cracked. "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. What about the locked automobile?"

"I can answer that one, Chief," said Breedlove glancing proudly at his grandson. "Foreman's car is a Ford. You can lock it from the outside with no trouble and no key."

"Then there should be a duplicate key to the professor's room," said Witt "You say there was such a key in Foreman's car. Well Professor Dockstader didn't have time to drop the key in the car after his little show. If this story is true, there is a key somewhere around that house, and what about the hat and coat?"

"That's just it," said Pete Breedlove, moving toward the door. "That's what proves I'm right. Professor Dockstader hid the hat and coat right where nobody would look for it, especially if we thought he was murdered. He put it in the only place he had time to put it, in the closet in his room. He just hung the coat in his closet and put the hat on the shelf. I've got to go now, Chief. I've got a math test this afternoon. Can I go, Bollo?"

"Sure, Pete," said the proud, confused sergeant.

"Breedlove, go over and check that closet," said Witt. "I don't think you'll find anything, but—"

"He'll find it all right," said the boy, with his hand on the doorknob. "I stopped by at the Dockstader house this morning to see Lucy and I checked the closet. A coat and hat just like the one on Foreman are in there and there's a key in the coat pocket. I could feel it from the outside."

Doc Fairbanks, laughing and choking, stood up and walked over to the boy. "Peter, my boy, it would be an honor if you would permit me to drive you to school, during which trip I can try to guide you toward a career in medicine. This town is sorely in need of another intelligent voice."

The old man and the eleven-year-old boy left the office and the two policemen stared at each other in silence for half a minute. With a grunt Breedlove lifted his massive weight from the chair and moved toward the door.

"Send those reporters in," Witt called to the closing door.

He scratched his head, fanned away a final cloud of cigar smoke and wondered what reaction he would get from the city council if he hired a part-time teen-age detective.

Oh—he shuddered—if he told them the real story of what had happened this day.

In the Next Issue—Complete and Exclusively Yours—

THE SYNTHETIC STORM AFFAIR

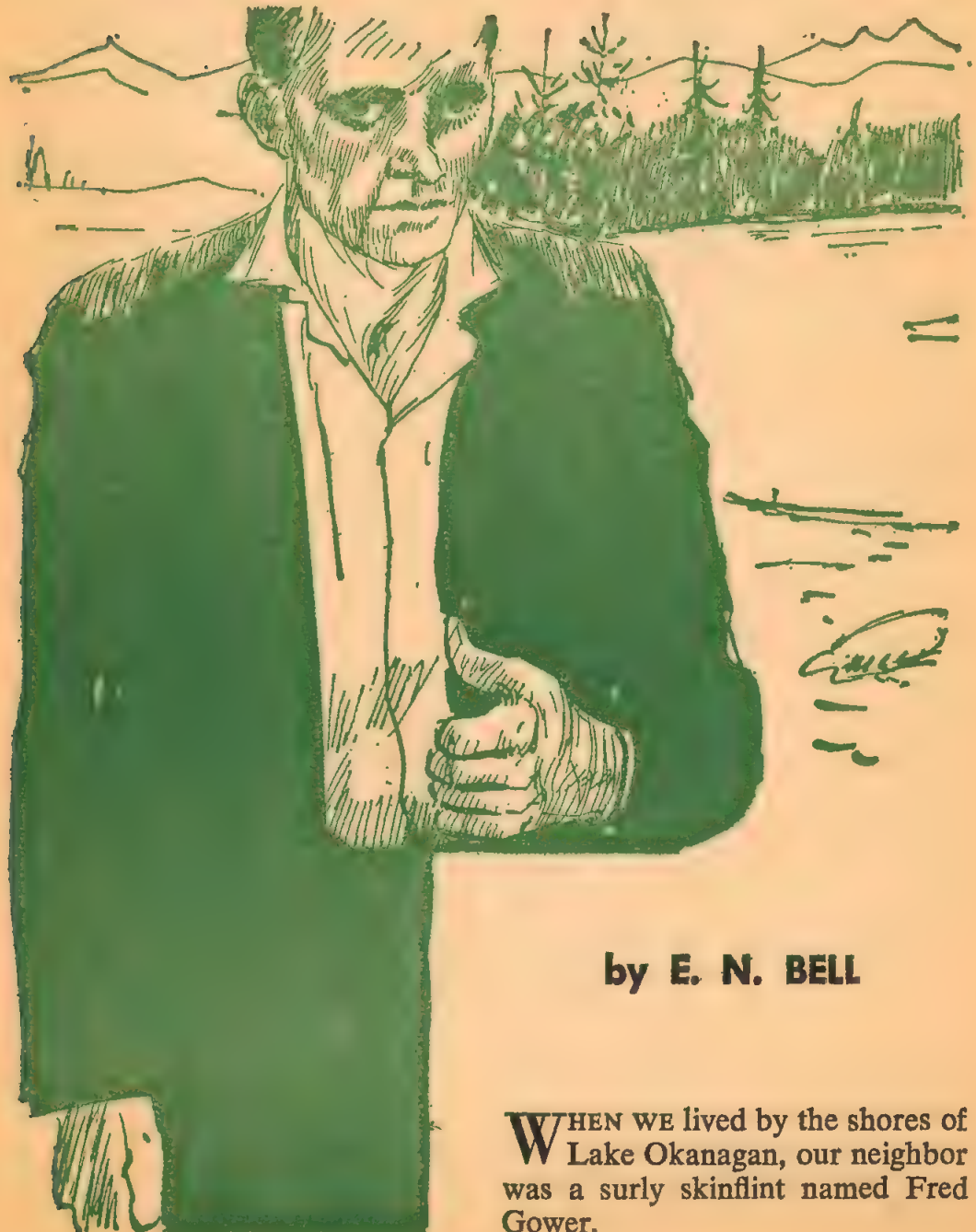
A Thrilling New "Man From U.N.C.L.E." Novel

by ROBERT HART DAVIS

Grey, sullen skies were over the world, as a man-made horror unleashed terror and death to all living things. For the first time THRUSH had joined forces with the most terrible force of destruction conceivable—angry Nature herself! While civilization waited, fearful and powerless, Solo and Illya fight to find the mad storm-maker who has promised himself one final goal—the ravagement and destruction of all mankind!

THE MONSTER

What was out there, under the dark waters? Only one man knew—and a woman long dead . . .



by E. N. BELL

WHEN WE lived by the shores of Lake Okanagan, our neighbor was a surly skinflint named Fred Gower.

Although he had plenty of money from past real estate dealings, he existed in the meanest manner. His only other claim to local fame was that he had seen Ogopogo, the monster serpent reputed to lurk in the depths of the lake.

This happened five years ago when his wife, Cora, was still alive. Cora died the April before last while she and Fred were visiting her cousin in Saskatchewan and she was buried back there. This motor trip, the sole vacation of their married life, even started unhappily with the worst thunderstorm of the year volleying through the valley.

We thought Fred might be more amiable on his return, for Cora had been a notorious scold, an ill nature forged through fifteen years of squeezing pennies out of Fred. Many a Saturday afternoon she entertained the town by berating him on the main street for his stinginess while he stood, bent and gangling, glaring down at his large, dirty boots in his usual sullen silence. She even belittled his sighting of the serpent.

"All in his head," she snorted with a whinny of laughter and her fat forefinger making circles around her ear.

Fred writhed with rage at such contempt for his story. The resultant flurry in the valley's newspapers and tourist associations had brought a brief importance, even a tinge of mystery and awe, into his drab life.

"I can't get over it," he repeated. "I was standin' on my dock, gettin' ready to go fishin' and there she was, by Myrtle Point—it's deep there. She was thrashin' and snakin' through the water with the sun gleamin' on her humps."

However, Fred, after Cora's death, was more churlish than before, so much so that the goodhearted ladies of the town stopped asking him for dinner or motoring out the three miles to leave cakes and jars of jelly on his porch. Apparently he preferred the dank gloom of his gray, old-fashioned, frame house.

It was surrounded by two acres of sunless woods which Fred had never bothered to clear and a narrow trail straggled to the sandy shore a hundred yards away. Here a low, wooden dock for Fred's motorboat jutted into the jeweled blue beauty of the lake. And here, from sunrise to moonrise, he waited for another glimpse of the serpent.

The once part-time hobby of monster-searching now deepened to a full-time obsession. Perhaps he still hoped to disprove Cora and all who had sneered with her. Perhaps too, he wanted a small measure of fame again.

Whatever his reasons, he sat daylong in his boat or on the dock, scanning the glassy lake with binoculars. He paid particular attention to the deep waters around the

shore directly opposite, where Myrtle Point bulged out from the massive, purple hills.

His pale blue eyes became permanently bloodshot from the dazzling sunlight and the brisker, autumn winds. His face, framed by sparse, sandy hair and a faded green cap, reddened to an angrier hue. He rarely fished now and we no longer heard him in the early morning shooting a partridge or pheasant on his land.

Once we suggested he hire a man to spell him with the watching—he could well afford it—but he mumbled, "Couldn't trust him," and abruptly shifted his intent gaze back to the lake.

However, he did place an advertisement in the valley's newspapers: "Anyone with recent knowledge of the Lake Okanagan monster please write Box such-and-such. Small payment for accurate info."

He culled the replies carefully because he said he didn't want "quacks and charlatans clutterin' up the doorway." Having seen the monster, he no doubt felt he could separate truth from fiction.

Strangely enough, he didn't mind the expense of monster-searching. He took numerous pictures of any bump, shadow, or shifting current on the lake and only went to town to have the photographs developed or to buy a few groceries. One day he came upon the drugstore clerks joking about his blank vistas of lake and sky. In

high dudgeon, he bought the necessary equipment and from then on developed his own film.

He grew increasingly hostile and suspicious, even of us, as though fearing someone might sight his precious monster first. Formerly, on our twilight strolls along the lakefront and past his dock, we had always stopped to chat with him. Now he turned away and glowered silently at the ruddy glare of the cold winter lake.

Then toward spring, Millie Deason, a friendly, little woman of about forty, came to town and opened a beauty parlor.

She was rather pretty in a fragile way with a small, straight nose and large, alert brown eyes behind her rimless spectacles.

She wasn't much of a hairdresser, having learned but one style many years before, a style which she applied to any willing head placed under her thin hands.

However her prices were cheap and her shop neat and clean. She soon acquired a steady clientele, became acquainted with the local gossip, and passed it along in her soft, childish voice.

One chilly Sunday afternoon, when the gray lake tossed and heaved as if the monster himself had decided to rise from his dark den, Millie turned up on Fred Gower's doorstep. Not finding him in the house, she took the trail to the shore. We saw her from our window, her tight brown curls secured by a pink kerchief and her little matchstick ankles twisting and turning in the damp sand.

Seemingly reluctant to walk along the slippery dock with the waters spuming over it, she halloed and waved at Fred like a wind-buffeted scarecrow. But it was a good five minutes before Fred, who stood slouched in a trance of concentration at the end of the dock, heard her frail voice above the battering wind and waves.

He turned with an annoyed yet curious frown; then, likely intrigued by the agitated stranger, plodded back up the dock. After a few words had passed between them, they headed toward the house.

As Millie said to her best customer the next day, "I went to tell him about this friend of mine who saw the monster a few years back. Of course, I've never seen the creature myself, but I thought he needed a bit of cheering up. It's enough to break his heart, looking and looking, and never seeing anything.

"Oh, he was a bit cross at first but I knew what he needed was a nice hot cup of tea. He was bound though he wouldn't go back to the house, but when I asked him if his wife was the same Cora Wilson who came from Maple Creek in Saskatchewan, he followed me back, real friendly-like. Wanted to talk about her, poor fellow. Imagine me and my sister going to high school with Cora, then me meeting her husband quite by accident, you might say, here, of all places. Lovely old house he has there, too. Could stand a bit of fixing up, though."

To our amazement, we saw her often after that keeping Fred company on the dock or, less frequently, in the boat. She feared the water. Then one balmy spring morning, to the further amazement of everyone, Fred took an hour off from his monster-searching and he and Millie were married.

Millie continued with the hairdressing business. "Might as well, what with Fred out on the lake all day," she explained, then added with a small pout and a sudden hard gleam in her brown eyes, "Besides I like having my own money. After all, what's money for if you can't spend it?"

Fred still kept tight control of the purse strings. Yet she seemed to think the world of him, for it was "Fred this" and "Fred that" until her customers grew quite wearied.

"Heaven knows Fred Gower's no catch," they said. "Except for his money, which she'll never pry

out of him anyway. And he's as glum as ever."

But when the summer tourists began streaming into the valley, Fred insisted Millie quit work and help in his search. "Oh, he's getting real nervous," Millie confided to us. "He thinks someone might see the monster ahead of him. But I really hate going out on the lake, you know."

And truly, on our excursions across the lake, we often saw her seated stiff and still at one end of the boat, her worried, sun-flushed face withdrawn from the blinding heat beneath a large straw hat and her thin hands clutching the sides of the boat. It was difficult to know if she feared the water or Fred more, with his wild, bulging stare straining across the shimmering water.

The town held that he was probably crazy. "Poor little Millie. Why on earth does she put up with him?" they said when they had the time or inclination to discuss the matter at all.

One sultry August afternoon, I came upon Millie standing by our mailboxes at the roadside, in the cool shade of the poplars. She was reading a letter and she was so absorbed in it, she looked startled to see me.

"A letter," she murmured with a puzzled frown. "From my sister in Maple Creek." She opened her mouth again as if to say more, then apparently changing her mind, hurried away back down the wooded path.

About a week later, there was a great commotion on the lake. Old Meggesson, who used to own the hardware store, had gone fishing at daybreak and had not returned for lunch as promised. He was always a dependable man so finally his wife, in alarm, asked the R.C.M.P. detachment to scour the lake for him.

After a few hours, the Mounties received an anonymous telephone call stating that Meggesson was seen earlier by Myrtle Point. Naturally, the Mounties concentrated in that area. As we learned later, Meggesson had merely gone to visit an old friend some miles up the lake and on his return his outboard motor had broken down, leaving him stranded for several hours.

In the meantime, however, the Mounties' search threw Fred into a terrible frenzy. "You'll disturb her! You'll disturb her!" he shrieked as he sped off toward Myrtle Point and the probing police boats. He presently became so meddlesome and violent that the Mounties ordered him back to the shore with dire warnings about obstructing the law.

"He'd better come back if he knows what's good for him," Millie said with a grim smile as we listened from their dock to the pandemonium echoing across the still lake. It was then that the police

pulled a body from the lake; Cora's body, weighted down and with a bullet in it.

"You see," Millie told us later, "my sister couldn't find any trace of Cora's grave near Maple Creek. Yet Fred claimed she was buried somewhere around there. Poor Cora, she never went on that vacation after all."

Millie raised her thin hands in a flutter of despair, then continued with a small, demure smile. "And I really didn't mean to mislead the Mounties about seeing Mr. Meggesson near Myrtle Point, but it seemed such a good chance to clear up the whole horrible business and relieve dear old Fred's mind."

They say Millie is now living in Vancouver in an expensive apartment. The court granted her a generous monthly allowance from Fred's hoard. As for Fred Gower, with good behavior he should be out of jail in about ten years time and I wouldn't want to be Millie when he learns of her free-spending ways.

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